

ランプ堂奇譚

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— In any case, like that, I finally started concerning myself with others. Like a child that has just started to walk – scared and confused, slowly.

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Ever since I was young, I sometimes saw strange things. These things that other people couldn't see are called youkai.

For example, when I wait at the intersection for the light to change and look across the road, somebody is standing there. She looks like a young woman. However, her face is green. Her long hair reaches her feet, and her red, inflamed eyes are glaring at me. Or when I'm heading home from school, walking with my classmates, there is a face in the wall of somebody's house. A man's face, three times larger than the usual, is watching passing schoolchildren with emotionless eyes.

It took me some time to realise only I could see them. I was scolded by an old man after I didn't hurry to cross even when the light turned green and the old man had pulled at my hand. When I said that I could see a large face in the wall with nothing in it, my classmates called me a liar. When things like that happened over and over, as expected, I thought it was strange. Somehow or other, it seemed that, besides the usual people and things that could be seen by everyone, there existed strange creatures that only I could see. At first, I thought that other people also had things that only they could see, and they just kept it to themselves. When I realised that other people couldn't see them, that in this world – in any case, in the small world that I lived in then – I was the only person who could see those strange creatures, I trembled in fear. I ended up hiding my ability.

However, no matter how carefully I tried to hide it, I could still see the things I saw. On top of that, most of them would appear suddenly. There were some that I could see so clearly that I couldn't tell the difference between them and normal human beings. I, who had lost my parents young and been passed from relative to relative, sometimes caused trouble because of that. Most people would think a child was strange if he pointed in a different direction and suddenly yelled, or talked to somebody in a room that had nobody in it. Every time I moved, the classmates who were kind to me at first would gradually leave me, since I 'always told lies'. It couldn't be helped, since I was at fault. That's what I thought, so I ended up trying to have as little to do with other people as possible.

– One day, I won't be able to see them anymore.

When I was a child, I spent every day hoping for that. Without opening my heart to anyone.

I was only able to connect closely with others after I was taken into my current home. The Fujiwara family, Shigeru-san and Touko-san, who are my considerably distant relatives, are kind-hearted people who heard that I was being passed around between my relatives and went out of their way to take me in. In this town, I also formed ties with ayakashi. Those came from incidents that arose from the overlapping of several coincidences and fates – that's what I think now. Because I

happened to hold something I inherited from my grandmother, a youkai attacked me to try to get it, and I broke a barrier when I was trying to run away, which let out an ayakashi that coincidentally happened to be an acquaintance of my grandmother, Reiko. That ayakashi is currently my bodyguard. His real form is a large ayakashi that looks like a beautiful white wolf, but normally he has the form of a round and fat pig cat – if you ask him, he says it's his vessel – and he is currently living with the Fujiwara family as a pet cat. I call him Nyanko-sensei.

My grandmother Reiko could see spirits like I can. With her strong spiritual power, she would challenge all the youkai she met, and when they lost, she would collect their names on sheets of paper as a sign that they had become her servants. If whoever held this book of contracts called the name of an ayakashi, it couldn't disobey - the 'Book of Friends'. The person who held it would have the power to control many youkai. There's no end to the Countless ayakashi come to me to try to take the Book of Friends or get their name back, since I inherited the Book of Friends from my grandmother. Nyanko-sensei is my bodyguard now because I promised him he would get the Book of Friends when I died. The Book of Friends became the foundation for me and Nyanko-sensei's bond. When I think about it, the beginnings for bonds like this always seem to fall into place. We just happened to be distant relatives. We just happened to be in the same class. We just happened to chat on the street – people's bonds are created by straining your ears to notice series of coincidences and fates like those ones. This is the opinion of somebody I'll talk about later.

In this town, my fate continues to overlap with other people and ayakashi. For the first time in my life, I learnt that this was how people form bonds with others. This is probably something that others learn when they're much younger. Sometimes I wonder – could I have had the same sort of relationships with the people I met before? If I had just noticed the chances scattered here and there and hadn't looked away.

In any case, like that, I finally started concerning myself with others. Like a child that has just started to walk – scared and confused, slowly.

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In the evening, I met Taki on the way back from Nanatsujiya. Taki is a girl at the same high school as me, in Class 5 and one of the important friends that I made in this town.

'Hi, Natsume. Ah...'

The moment after her eyes met Nyanko-sensei's:

'Kyaa! Kitty!' Taki squealed, and she hugged Sensei.

Nanatsujiya is Sensei's favourite manjuu shop. That day, I had bought the new red bean paste flavour with mugwort in it, so Sensei had been hurrying me because he wanted to get home more quickly to eat it. Sensei was struggling in Taki's arm while grumbling, 'Oi, stop it, let go of me, you.'

'Ah, sorry,' Taki said as she handed Sensei back to me and released him.

Taki knows that I can 'see' and also that Nyanko-sensei is an ayakashi.

The first time I met Taki, she had been wearing a plain coat with an old hat covering her eyes, trying as hard as she could to not stand out – she had been walking carefully so that people wouldn't call out to her. I found out afterwards that that was so she could fight a youkai on her own, but since I hadn't known at the time, I had carelessly called out to her, and Taki, who had been surprised, ended up saying my name back to me. Because of that, I learned a lot about her situation and about her. I also know now that she's actually a girl who likes to talk a lot and loves cute things.

'Taki, are you heading home now?' I said, looking at Taki in her uniform with her schoolbag.

'Yes, I ended up staying late since I was doing some research at the library.'

'Research?'

'Yes, a little.'

'More importantly, what are you holding?' said Nyanko-sensei, who had been sniffing since a little while ago. 'It smells like an ayakashi.'

Sensei's nose was pointed towards Taki's bag.

'Ah, it might be this.'

Like it had just come to mind, Taki took a white envelope that was a bit larger than the regular ones from her bag.

'Hm, that's it.'

I looked at the letter in Taki's hand, but it didn't look like anything especially strange was stuck to it.

'Is a youkai hiding inside the envelope, Sensei?'

'Who knows. It might just smell like an ayakashi because it was near ayakashi for a long time. I only feel a faint presence.'

'Taki, could you let me see it?'

'Ah, OK.'

The white envelope had already been opened neatly with a paper knife. Inside, I could see one piece of stationary and one more brown envelope. The reason the white envelope had been bigger than usual was probably so that it could hold both of these. I took out the other envelope that had been inside. It looked like it hadn't been glued close, and the top portion had only been folded neatly.

'What is this?'

'That was something addressed to my grandfather, but...'

'Your grandfather?'

Taki's grandfather was interested in youkai and spent his whole life searching for them. Taki, who

inherited some items from her grandfather Shinichirou-san, wound up involved with youkai because of it.

'There were some circumstances, so it arrived now. The circumstances are written in the letter.'

Taki held out the brand new piece of stationery that had been in the white envelope.

'The old envelope that was also enclosed had already been written ten or so years ago, but for some reason, it hadn't been sent. Then recently, the letter's owner...'

For a moment, Taki stopped speaking to correct herself.

'The person who wrote this passed away. One of her grandchildren found this and sent it.'

'Really? The contents... Did you read them?'

'Yes. I couldn't read it well.'

'Eh?'

'There are those wavy letters that people in the past used to write, right?'

'Ah, do you mean cursive?'

'It was written like that. I couldn't read it, so I thought I would research how to read it at the library, but it seems like it's a bit different from cursive...'

'Hmm.'

Without thinking, I tried to take a look at the contents, but just barely stopped my hand. Something might have flown out and hurt Taki.

'Natsume, what's the point of getting involved with something like that? Hurry up and go home.'

'What are you saying? You were the one who said you smelled an ayakashi, Sensei.'

'I need to hurry home to eat manjuu. If you're interested, you can just take that envelope home and investigate it later.'

'Eh? Ah, that's true... Taki, could I borrow this?'

I couldn't let Taki take something that had the presence of an ayakashi home.

'Ah, OK. I want to read that letter if I can. I want to know what sorts of things were written to my grandfather. If that letter has some relation to youkai, then you might have a better chance of reading it than me, Natsume-kun.'

In this world, ayakashi have their own writing, and the Book of Friends was written in that. This might be the same kind of writing.

'If you can read it, tell me what's written in it, OK?'

'OK, thank you.'

'Come on, Natsume. If you're finished talking, let's go home.'

I was hurried away by Nyanko-sensei, so I said goodbye to Taki and headed to the Fujiwaras' home.

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'Sensei, you said that earlier so Taki wouldn't be in danger, right?'

'Hah? Why would I have to worry about something like that? Even if an ayakashi came out from the letter there, there's nothing to worry about if I'm there. I'd knock it down before it could do anything to you.'

'That's true, but you never know.'

Sensei hmph-ed as he ate his manjuu.

I took out the envelope I got from Taki and looked inside. When I thought about it, it would've been fine if I had just taken the old letter that had the presence of ayakashi, but I noticed then that I had also taken home the white envelope it had been in. I had felt awkward about reading a letter addressed to someone else, but since Taki had handed it over too, that probably meant it was OK for me to read as well. On top of that, the person who should have read this letter had already passed away.

First, I took out the letter from the white envelope and read it.

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Dear Taki Shinichirou-sama

My name is Sako Yoshimi, and I am the granddaughter of Fujie Ichiko, who had taken care of the antique shop called Lamp Hall. Fujie is my mother's maiden name, so Ichiko was my maternal grandmother.

Last month, on the 29th, my grandmother Ichiko passed away. While I was sorting through the inheritance, I found a bundle of letters addressed from Taki-sama to my grandmother that was kept with great care. None of my relatives knew Taki-sama, but I understood that he was somebody who had a close friendship with my grandmother, so I am writing to inform him of my grandmother's death.

When I found the bundle of letters from Taki-sama, I was unsure as to whether I should inform him of my grandmother's death or not. I arbitrarily looked at the letters, but there was not much in way of content – only two numbers written after a black circle. There were more than a hundred of these mysterious letters. Is that some sort of code? There were some relatives who told me to throw them out since they were strange, but as I was interested, I decided to look through my grandmother's diary.

When I did, I saw that directly after the postmark of each letter, there would be numbers written in the diary. Those numbers were exactly the same as the ones in the letter. My grandmother would always write down the numbers from the letters Taki-sama sent. When I looked more, a few days after or sometimes a few months after, I understood that my grandmother would send a reply. The oldest letter I found was from before my mother was born. It seems he had this mysterious

correspondence with my grandmother for many years.

In my grandmother's diary, the only things that are written down are the day's weather, what she ate, or sometimes the things she sold. Among those, the numbers from Taki-sama's letters and the words 'A reply to Taki-sama' give off a conspicuous colour. I felt that to my grandmother, they had a special meaning.

Incidentally, there was something else saved with the letters from Taki-sama. It was a letter addressed to him from my grandmother. It was in an old envelope and it had the address written on it, but it had not been sealed, and the letter inside was written in strange letters so I could not read it.

When I looked in the diary again, I saw that a few months after the day the very last letter from Taki-sama arrived, my grandmother had written, 'I will write a reply letter. Without sending it.' I thought she was referring to this letter. It appears that my grandmother kept this letter with her for a long time.

Then, I decided at my own discretion to inform Taki-sama of my grandmother's death and send this letter as well. We do not know what Taki-sama's current circumstances are. If this letter does not reach him and is instead received by his family, please feel free to dispose of it.

Hopefully, this will put a 'period' to form a nice ending to Taki-sama and my grandmother's many years of correspondence.

Sincerely, Sako Yoshimi

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It was a strange story.

Exactly what sort of messages were this old lady and Taki's grandfather sending each other? Would reading the other enclosed letter solve that puzzle? I took the letter out from the brown envelope and unfolded it.

Just as Taki had said, strange, wavy letters were lined up on the piece of paper.

'So? Was there an ayakashi inside?'

I heard Sensei ask that after he finished eating his manjuu.

'No, there's nothing here.'

The moment I replied, the letters started moving.

Just when I thought they were rolling like waves, the black letters crept about on top of the paper and then jumped out.

'Uwah!'

For a moment, everything went black. The things that had jumped from the paper had split into two groups and flown into my eyes.

'What happened, Natsume?'

'Something just flew into my eyes!' I yelled as I covered my eyes.

'What. Let me see.'

Sensei growled as he peeked into my eyes.

'Hm, what are these things?'

'Is there something in there, Sensei!?'

'Skinny little things like worms are moving around in the back of your eyes.'

'Eh!? Are they youkai? Sensei, do something.'

'Why should I?'

'You're my bodyguard! Plus, you said that even if something came out, you'd knock it down before it could do anything to me!'

'I can't watch over you even for these small fry of the small fry! Do something yourself.'

'Even if you say do something...'

'Having that level of spiritual power in your body won't be much of an issue anyway. Does it hurt?'

It had hurt for the moment that they flew into my eyes, but I didn't feel anything now.

'Does anything look strange?'

I looked around, but everything looked the same. It seemed like there hadn't been any effect on my sight.

'Then there's no harm. Just leave them alone – they're small fry. If I tried to take them out with my power, I'd end up damaging your eyes.'

'But...'

Even if they were small things that didn't do any harm, I felt uncomfortable having youkai in my body.

Suddenly, I thought of somebody who had an ayakashi in the shape of a lizard birthmark on his body. It had been there since he was young. It did no harm and moved around his body, but the one place it wouldn't go was his left leg.

'You can just think of it as something like that.'

Sensei was irresponsible to the end.

'Anyway, what about the letter, Natsume?'

'Ah, I forgot about that.'

The places that the letter ayakashi had been had become discoloured stains, and there was one portion that couldn't be red, but I could see the original contents of the letter written in beautiful

regular script.

'Ah, I see. Mojibake had been living here.'

'Mojibake?'

'Like the name, they're ayakashi who garble text. They live in old paper and take on the appearance of human letters. There are animals that change to look like their surroundings to hide from natural predators, right? These are the same.'

'Camouflage, you mean?'

So there are youkai that are like chameleons and inchworms.

'Mojibake neither understand human language nor can they read letters. They just take on the appearance of something like it. The person who sent that letter was the owner of an antique shop, right? The mojibake probably copied some Buddhist sutras or something in the back of that antique shop.'

I see. There was no helping it when Taki couldn't read the letters even after researching them.

'But why did they go into my eyes even though they didn't move when Taki was reading the letter?'

'I've heard that mojibake are ayakashi that don't usually move around much in the first place. They pretend to be letters for a long time without moving. They probably responded to your spiritual power. They might have been surprised and thought an enemy had appeared.'

Things like this happen sometimes when you have power. When I was younger, I had lamented my unluckiness, but I now hope that the power will continue to accompany me well. That said, of course I get depressed when things like this happen.

Now, on the letter that the mojibake had jumped out from, there was a omark followed by the numbers '14 – 9' in kanji. After that, a short sentence had been written, but there was a stain from the mojibake so it couldn't be read. It just looked like 'I s th en f e me i n it '.

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'Oh, Takashi-kun. Are you washing your face again?'

I had gone downstairs to wash my face at the sink when Touko-san called out to me. She knew that I had gone to wash my face before going upstairs when I had returned.

'Ah, no... Nyanko-sensei had been playing around and then some dust got into my eye.'

Sensei snorted, as if to say, Don't blame it on me.

'Are you OK? Could you let me take a look?'

Touko-san moved closer to my face and looked at it carefully. She used her finger to pull my eyelid down a bit.

'Hm, I can't see anything. It doesn't hurt, does it?'

'Ah, no, not at all.'

When I had Sensei check afterwards, the mojobake were still definitely in my eyes. It seemed that people couldn't see the mojobake that had flown out of the paper.

'I'm glad. It looks like you got it out. It'll be dinner soon, so come after you've dried your face.'

'I will.'

I wonder if she thought that was strange. No, it's fine even if she did. In the past, I would have tried to hide more than necessary and actually invite distrust. Now, even little interactions like this made me happy.

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In the end, that day passed with no effect from the youkai that had flown into my eyes. However, I just hadn't noticed the effect, though the change had already occurred. I noticed it the next day.

There was already an omen at school, at lunch in the corridor when I ran into Tanuma, who had been looking at the schoolyard.

'Natsume... is there anything there?'

Tanuma, like me, can feel the presence of ayakashi. That was how we became friends.

'Hm? No, I don't see anything.'

'Oh, then it's just my mistake. I thought I'd seen some sort of shadow moving in the bushes.'

Tanuma can't see ayakashi as clearly as I can. He usually only felt them as shadows and presences.

'Oi, Tanuma? PE's next!'

'Ah, I'm coming. See you, Natsume.'

Tanuma returned to his classroom after his classmate Kitamoto called out to him. After he left, I looked at the bushes Tanuma had pointed out to me once more just to check, but I couldn't see anything like an ayakashi.

Nothing else occurred. A large face didn't suddenly appear in the wall of somebody's house, and there was no green-faced woman standing on the other side of the crosswalk. Maybe because the sun was bright that day, so the sunlight felt pleasant and gentle, but I wasn't concerned about the youkai in my eyes. There were such small youkai, and just like Sensei said, there might be no problem if they didn't cause any harm. Just when I had started thinking that way, and I was walking near the street where the kappa always collapsed with the bowl on his head parched, I stepped on something soft.

'Ugyaa!'

I heard a voice. I immediately looked to my feet, but nothing was there.

'Hey, Natsume! That's awful!'

The kappa's voice? But from where?'

'Even though you've saved me so many times, I don't remember receiving such poor treatment! If it's like this, even if you're my benefactor, I'll ask for a match... Ah, I'm dizzy.'

I heard the sound of something falling, but I still couldn't see the kappa.

Unexpectedly, Nyanko-sensei appeared.

'Sensei, I heard the kappa's voice, but I don't see him.'

'What? You can't see the little thing there?'

Sensei stared at my face.

'Tha... Even if you lie... I won't be fool... *yawn*.'

From that weak voice, it was clear that the kappa was there, with his bowl dried up as usual. However, I couldn't see him.

'Sensei, could this be...'

It had to be the mojobake.

'Natsume, come.'

Sensei took me to Yatsuhara. Before that, I drew some water from somewhere nearby and poured it in the direction the voice was coming from. The kappa, who had been grumbling since before, gave his thanks as he always did and seemed to run off somewhere.

At Yatsuhara, the two chuukyu and other ayakashi appeared to have gathered around me at Sensei's call.

'It's a serious affair if Natsume-sama can't see us anymore!'

'A serious affair, a serious affair!'

'How deplorable. Becoming unable to see us because something like mojobake got into your eyes – there's a limit to how weak you can be. Though that's cute too.'

'Uwah, stop! Don't breathe on me so suddenly, Hinoe!'

'I don't know what this meat dumpling shorty was doing, but he's a completely useless bodyguard!'

'Shut up! Someone noble like me has rules about not dealing with small fry like that.'

The ayakashi who had gathered around me because they were worried were certainly there. However, I couldn't see any of them at all besides Nyanko-sensei. Since Nyanko-sensei's appearance as a round, piggy cat was a vessel that could be seen by other people, I could see him now as well. That's why we didn't notice the change at all the day before.

'Natsume, how about this?'

With a cloud of smoke, Sensei disappeared.

Suddenly, there was nobody around me.

'Sensei, are you there?'

I spoke up in an insecure voice.

Silence.

One bicycle passed by.

As a man in a baseball cap walked past, he looked dubiously at me, standing in a field by myself.

'... Sensei.'

'Relax. I'm here.'

I felt relieved when I heard his voice.

'Please return to your original form. I can't calm down when I can only hear your voice.'

'It's not my original form. This is just a temporary form to conceal myself.'

While complaining, Sensei turned back into his Nyanko form.

'If such small ayakashi can directly possess humans, they aren't exactly harmless. This is interesting,' said Chobi.

'It can't be helped. I'll look for information about the mojobake for you,' said Hinoe.

'But it would be better not to let other ayakashi know about this.'

'Let's keep this a secret between us.'

'Secret, secret,' said the two chuukyuuu.

I felt grateful from the bottom of my heart. Not being able to see them was irritating.

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I thought while walking home from Yatsuhara with Sensei.

– What if I'll never be able to see them again?

I've met somebody before who lost his ability to see ayakashi and so couldn't see the ayakashi whom he had bonded with anymore. That was after I had met Nyanko-sensei and the others, so when I found out something like that could happen, I felt a fear deep inside me.

'What are you thinking about, Natsume?'

'Ah, nothing much.'

'You're probably thinking about useless things, like what if the mojobake take more of your power and start breeding in your eyes to spread throughout your body or something.'

'No I'm not! Don't say such terrifying things, Sensei.'

I hadn't been imagining anything so unpleasant, but I couldn't say it wouldn't happen. Though right now I just couldn't see ayakashi, I might become unable to hear them or even feel their presence.

If I lost my ability to notice youkai, they would probably stop interacting with me. Nyanko-sensei... might snatch the Book of Friends away from me and run off somewhere, since I can't even give back the names of the ayakashi who come to ask for them anymore. I would no longer have days full of ayakashi bothering me. That should have been something I couldn't stop wishing for as a child, but what was the loneliness I felt in my chest now?

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That night, I saw a strange dream.

I was in a dim room – pots and plates, hanging scrolls, ceramic dolls, wall clocks, a peculiar musty smell. The entire shop was blanketed in mysterious rainbow colours. There was a register in the back.

One old lady was looking at a letter she had just finished writing. That was probably the letter that the mojobake had been in. The old lady put the letter into an addressed envelope with resolve. When she was about to glue the letter closed, her hand stopped. The old lady let out a sigh and put the envelope in a drawer without sealing it.

Suddenly, a mysterious light filled the shop, and the antiques lining the walls started clamouring, as if in response to the old lady's sigh. A lamp that wasn't plugged in was letting out a warm light, and shadows of dolls started dancing lightly. It was as if the antiques had put on a banquet to console the old lady. However, the old lady didn't seem to notice and closed her eyes, as if to mull over her memories. Soon, she fell into a doze.

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I continued not being able to see ayakashi for three days. It seemed that the youkai at Yatsuhara had kept the secret to themselves, and the kappa appeared to have understood as well and didn't tell anybody, so I wasn't attacked by any youkai. The silver lining in the situation with the mojobake was that they hadn't increased, and nothing worse happened in that regard. I wasn't particularly inconvenienced, and my days could have been called peaceful. Just, my interest was piqued by the dream.

'Isn't that the mojobake saying that want to go back to that old lady's store?'

That was what Hinoe said after she came to report her findings after researching the mojobake. Unfortunately, she didn't have any results. Nobody had heard of mojobake possessing humans through their eyes, much less a method to chase them out.

'I see; that might be it. Natsume, will you go to that shop?'

Sensei's unusual proactivity might have been because he, standing by my side, also felt uncomfortable about the half-baked situation I was in.

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On the third day, Taki called out to me when I was the way home, and I returned the letter to her. I gave her the summary of what happened with the mojobake, but since I didn't want her to worry for no reason, I decided not to tell her that they had gone into my eyes. Taki was surprised when she saw the letter without the mojobake and was sincerely happy that the words could be read now. However, the meaning of the numbers remained a mystery.

'But thank you. I don't know what it means, but I think this letter was important to my grandfather.'

'Um... about the antique shop called Lamp Hall mentioned in the letter.'

'?'

'The address is different than the address of the granddaughter, Sako Yoshimi, but I wonder if it's still there.'

'Ah, the shop? What about it?'

'It just caught my interest, so I'd like to go once.'

'Eh?'

Surprised, Taki looked at me for a while, but she answered without asking me anything.

'If that's the case, you'll have to go soon or the shop will be gone.'

'Eeh?'

'I sent a letter of gratitude to that person. To thank her for sending a letter to my grandfather. I thought I should inform her of my grandfather's death too. I got the reply to that yesterday, and it said that after a discussion between the relatives, it was decided that the antique shop would be closed.'

'Oh, I see...'

'She wrote that there was nobody to take over the shop. The owner of the building the shop is in wants to rebuild it too, so once the exorcism is finished, they'll start on that right away.'

'The exorcism?'

'Hm?'

'What do you mean by exorcism?'

'I don't know exactly. Since it's a shop that handles antiques, if they're destroying it, there might be a lot of things there.'

I see, I thought, but I felt a little stuck. Were antique shops always exorcised when they closed?

'If you're going, Natsume-kun, should I contact Yoshimi-san?'

'Ah, no, that's...'

Even if Taki went out of her way to do that for me, it would be difficult to explain when somebody who was a complete stranger like me would visit. There was no way I could say that the youkai who had flown into my eyes wanted to return to that shop. I dodged Taki's question by saying that I had just planned on going when I felt like it so there was no need.

'I think I'll look through my grandfather's things once more, since the same letters should definitely be there.'

Taki looked determined, with fists clenched. Taki's grandfather Shinichirou had left a lot of belongings in the attic and the storeroom, so it wouldn't be easy. Then, when I was leaving, like it had just come to mind:

'Ah, and if you're going to visit Lamp Hall, I'll hand this letter over to you again. Since the address is written on it.'

Taki handed over just the old brown envelope, taking it out from the second envelope.

'OK.'

At that time, I casually accepted it, but it would cause a serious misunderstanding afterwards.

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In any case, the next Sunday, I decided to visit Lamp Hall, taking Nyanko-sensei with me. I probably wouldn't be able to go inside, but it would be fine if I could just look from outside. I didn't really have any hopes for that being enough for the mojibake in my eyes to feel nostalgic and leave.

The shop was near a train station that could be reached after a few stops by express train from a local station. It was in the centre of a fairly large city with a university, so it had many students. It was unexpectedly close to home, and I arrived before noon after departing past ten. I heard some time ago from Shigeru-san that this town didn't have a direct line before, and even when travelling by train, it was necessary to make a large detour. Most people commuting to the university stayed at boarding houses.

After eating a quick lunch at an udon shop near the station since Nyanko-sensei was badgering me, I searched for the shop while looking at the address on the back of the brown envelope

The town was mountainous in the north, and there was level ground all the way to the ocean in the south, but the station itself was built in the north. Halfway up the mountain, there was a shrine with a long history, and the town grew on the two sides of the road leading to the shrine. The university was on high ground as well, so the old school building looked down on the town. When you left the station, there was a bus roundabout, with five roads radiating out.

I checked the address on the map at the police box beside the station and walked through the shopping district that stretched northwest along the railroad tracks from the station. It seemed like a student district, lined with second-hand bookshops, stationery shops and stylish cafes. The shop I was looking for, Lamp Hall, was a little out of place. On the way, each time we passed a child, they would see Nyanko-sensei and giggle or point, Sensei was thoroughly offended.

'Oi, Natsume, I'm going home. Go to the antique shop yourself.'

'Don't say that – come with me. I'll treat you to manjuu at Nanatsujiya.'

I turned at a few streets and went onto a side road and was checking the address on the envelope when a woman passed by.

'Excuse me, is there an antique shop called Lamp Hall near here?'

'Eh?'

The woman turned to face me, looking very surprised.

'If you're looking for Lamp Hall, if you turn left there and walk north along the river you'll reach it in no time...'

She might have been a university student, with her long hair tied into a ponytail and a feathered accessory that looked Native American around her neck. She was wearing faded blue jeans and had a paper bag from a bookshop. Though her appearance was plain, it felt somehow refined.

'But that shop is already...'

'Ah, I know. I just have a connection...'

'Oh, OK...'

The woman looked at me dubiously. Then, she spotted the letter I was holding and appeared taken aback. She looked like she wanted to say something, but in the end, she just bowed and left.

'Come on, Natsume, hurry up.'

When I turned at the corner, just as the woman had told me to, there was a small river there, and from the south to the north, there was a pleasant street lined with willows with swaying branches. On the opposite riverbank, Sensei spotted a sign for a sweet shop and wanted to cross over, but I managed to get the better of him so we continued walking north along the river. The student district had come to an end and regular houses continued. Lamp Hall was among them.

When we reached the front of the shop, Sensei suddenly stood up and growled.

'Ugh, this is not a good sign, Natsume.'

'What's wrong, Sensei?'

'Something unpleasant is here.'

'An ayakashi?'

'Hm, from my thoughts it's something more unpleasant.'

We were standing in front of the shop. A sign saying the shop was open was hanging on the door, but I couldn't feel a human presence from inside.

'What on earth is inside, Sensei?'

At that moment, the door opened slowly. When I saw the face of the person who appeared, I couldn't not be surprised. If you were to call series of coincidences the fates people share, this person and I were surely very connected by fate.

'Oh? Natsume. We've met somewhere unexpected.'

A handsome face smiled brightly at me. In my surprise, I called out that person's name loudly.

'Natori-san!'

-

Notes:

The word en (縁) comes up a lot in this story. I couldn't decide on a consistent translation and ended up using 'connect', 'ties' &c. (It was that or 'Natsume formed social links', OK?). However, I felt that lost a lot of the word's nuances so if you're interested, I'd suggest looking up the translation for the word yourself!

Guuzen (偶然) and hitsuzen (奇縁) also come up a lot. If you've read Holic, you'll recognise the terms, and here I've usually translated them as coincidence and fate. Again, the translation is a bit lacking, so if you're interested, look up hitsuzen.

They're translated as cursive and regular below, but to be specific, they're sushotai (草書体) and kaishotai (楷书体), which are both methods for writing kanji.

The words that the mojiyake covered are actually stained in the actual novel, but I couldn't think of a good way to show it. m(_ _;)m



— If you harm my important friend, I won't hold back.

2

-

Regarding the difference between coincidence and fate.

Or, regarding merely one meeting.

How are these two separated?

In the air, many molecules flutter about. Those are measured using the unit of measurement called the mole. Molecule and molecule randomly collide, moving around and drawing complex trajectories like billiard balls, but within the unit of measurement called the mole, that is always balanced, and it draws the whole image that is a tranquil and peaceful world. A god that governs the whole world probably does not care at all about the gasps small beings like us make at the pain we feel from the daily collisions of coincidences. Even so, what are these coincidences?

Sako Yoshimi was thinking about the theory that everything in the world was governed as she looked at the face of the man she had never met before sitting in front of her.

'This is troubling. I had been certain that the proprietor of Antiques Suzuki would be here.'

'We were surprised as well. Since Suzuki-san said he would introduce a good exorcist to us, we had thought for sure that you would be someone older.'

'My family has known Suzuki-san's for generations. I can't refuse a request from them. But it's a secret that I do this sort of work.'

Mischievously, he pressed his index finger against his lips.

'Ah, yes, that's clear.'

'For work that is referred to me, I try my best not to meet with the person who makes the request. My face is rather well-known, after all.'

'Certainly. We were surprised, right?'

Yoshimi's mother waved at her, but Yoshimi gave a vague reply: 'Well.'

Of course Yoshimi knew that that man was the famous actor Natori Shuuichi. However, if she had to pick, she liked old films more and did not watch television dramas often, so she could not say he was that familiar of an actor to her. As a matter of fact, she had heard the name from a friend in the same seminar when discussing a group report at the students' hall.

'Did you hear, Yoshimi? They're filming for a movie at the science department right now. Natori Shuuichi's here.'

'Natori Shuuichi, as in that Natori Shuuichi?'

The science department building at Yoshimi's university was an antique built before the war. She had heard that it was sometimes used for films, but she had not thought that would happen while she was attending.

'Hey, want to go look? We might be able to get his autograph.'

Yoshimi was invited by her friend, but she did not go. She knew Natori Shuuichi's face and name, but she was not really a fan. It was not that she did not want to see a famous person, but she did not want to be thought of as one of those crazy fans. Nevertheless, when she returned home and turned on the television, suddenly, his face appeared. It was a rebroadcast of a drama, and Natori put on a good performance as the heroine's partner.

– Oh, he's pretty cool.

I should've gone to see him too. She regretted it a little, but well, it had just not been meant to be. She gave up and put the thought away in the back of her head. In any case, she had to clean up some troublesome matters tomorrow.

Her grandmother had passed away, and at a meeting between relatives, it was decided that Lamp Hall would be closed. First, the owner of the building wanted to rebuild the deteriorated building. While they paid rent, the shop had almost no sales. The most important reason was that there was no one to take over the shop.

Yoshimi thought that it was a bit unfortunate that her grandmother's shop was closing. Her grandmother had been the relative she lived closest to, so when she had been a child, she had often gone to that shop to play. When her grandmother saw her granddaughter open the door cheerfully and come on, she would always smile from the bench at the back of the shop and say – 'Welcome!'

– as a greeting. The inside was dim, blanketed in the colours of the rainbow. That was because of several lamps hanging from the ceiling. All of them were for sale, and the lamps were taken out, so all that was left hanging from the ceiling were the stained glass lampshades. They had naturally gathered at this shop from before her grandmother's time. They reflected the faint light that came in from the window beside the entrance, making the shop look like a room of dreams. Then, in the most conspicuous spot, as if it were the queen of the other lamps, was a light stand. It was patterned with gently curving plants. On the large, open cover, there were butterflies and dragonflies in the glasswork. That stand, an art nouveau piece of rare beauty, was not plugged in, but it always appeared to glow faintly. That light gave new life to the antiques that had been thrown away and were not being used anymore by anyone. The ceramic Chinese doll and the sumi-e characters on the wall scrolls, and even the bowls and plates and old objects with unknown uses had a 'presence', like they were saying something. For the young Yoshimi, the shop was a small wonderland.

– There are undoubtedly souls resting in old things.

She remembered something that her grandmother had often said. Things with value and things

without, my grandmother loved them all the same. Yoshimi also liked playing with doorknobs that had lost their purpose and broken toys whenever she came to this shop.

Maybe it was because of those experiences she had when she was young, but Yoshimi ended up with an exceptional interest in products of old civilisations. Her major in folklore was also because of her interest in antiquity.

Accordingly, she had been very against destroying Lamp Hall when she silently sat at the foot of the table during the meeting with her relatives, but in the end, she could not say that aloud. After thinking about various situations, it was impossible for her or the other relatives to take over Lamp Hall.

To run an antique shop, it was necessary, because of the law regarding business in second-hand items, to send a report to the police in order to receive permission to do business. The licence for selling second-hand items could be acquired by anybody who was not bankrupt and did not have a criminal record, but the problem was knowledge. When somebody comes to the shop to sell antiques, what price should they be bought at? Then, what price should they be sold at? If the shop owner cannot make the judgement, the business will not do well. Yoshimi's grandmother had tended the shop ever since she was young and learnt directly from Yoshimi's great-grandfather. There was no way that Yoshimi, who was just dabbling in folklore at university, could have contended.

For those reasons, it was decided that the shop would be closed and that Lamp Hall's wares would be sold, but then there was a strange incident.

It happened when they were going to have the many antiques left in the shop appraised. They had gathered friends of her grandmother who also dealt in antiques from a register of names her grandmother had kept. Yoshimi was there since she was recruited to help.

'Oh, this is rare. This is good.'

'This one has no certificate. It's probably cheap.'

The professionals continued to appraise the items. There were a fair number of items of value, but more than expected were worthless odds and ends and could only be put out as rubbish. In any case, the items to be thrown out were to be put outside the shop, and Yoshimi's uncles were going to take them out, when – there was a clattering noise.

'A rattling house?'

For a moment, words that she had heard in one of her lectures flashed through Yoshimi's mind.

The uncles stopped for a moment, but, probably thinking they had misheard, picked the items up again. This time, there was a noisy rattling sound.

'It's a poltergeist!' shouted Yoshimi's horror-loving nephew.

'Hm, this is bad.'

The person who said that and stopped their work was the proprietor of Antiques Suzuki, who had

been an old friend of Yoshimi's grandmother.

'The antiques are making a racket, Suzuki-san,' agreed the owner of Antique Store Koujitsuan.

'This sort of thing happens sometimes. The antiques make a fuss when it's time to part.'

'Probably because this shop is filled with Ichiko-san's memories.'

The uncles thought the antique shop owners were being ridiculous, so they tried to carry the items out by force, but the rattling became even worse, and even the uncles who were not superstitious felt resigned.

'Um, what should we do?'

'Hm. One of my acquaintances specialises in this sort of thing, so shall I make a request? Our families have known each other for generations, and his has a long lineage of exorcists. They had stopped for a while, but they started their family business again recently and have a reputation for being very skilled at what they do.'

Yoshimi's relatives accepted the offer of the owner of Antiques Suzuki and decided to request for that person's exorcism services. After, Suzuki contacted them to ask that they open the shop this day because that person had just had some work to do in the area.

'Yoshimi, will you come too?'

Yoshimi's mother asked her that two days ago.

'Eh? Why me?'

'You're studying this sort of thing at university, aren't you?'

'Well, I can't say it's unrelated, but I'm not studying exorcism.'

'Even if he's somebody Suzuki-san introduced, it'd be troublesome if I was tricked. Please come with me.'

Yoshimi's mother was Ichiko's third daughter and married into another family, but as she was the one who lived closest to Lamp Hall out of the relatives, the duty of meeting the exorcist had fallen upon her.

Thus, on that day, Yoshimi went together with her mother to the appointed café to meet that skilful exorcist.

Before leaving the house, Yoshimi chose a couple of technical books on charms from the bookshelf and put them in a paper bag. Then, since it might come in handy, she also put in a notebook, in which she had copied out portions of her grandmother's diary that had caught her interest. When she was about to leave her room, the mirror caught her eye and she noticed that she looked extremely plain. There was no need for her to dress up, but it was unlikely that she would look like she was putting on airs if she dressed up a little before meeting someone. With that in mind, Yoshimi took out a necklace with a Native American charm from a box full of accessories. It had a net weaved with ivy and string, with bird feathers attached to the net. The charm was called a

dream catcher and was supposed to catch bad dreams. Then, Yoshimi tied her hair up in a ponytail and started feeling like she was really going to go exterminate youkai.

Even so... While sitting quietly next to her mother, Yoshimi brought her cup of coffee to her mouth and thought things over again.

– Why is this person here?

The exorcist who appeared was the actor Yoshimi had seen the day before in the drama – Natori Shuuichi.

After the owner of Antiques Suzuki had paid him, an urgent exchange meeting had popped up so he left in a hurry. The exchange meeting was a market that was only open to fellow antique dealers. Yoshimi's mother, who had been on guard before coming to the café, was also excited about meeting someone famous and so could not care less about Lamp Hall's exorcism.

'If you could tell me where the shop is, I would like to continue by myself.'

'Eh? But...'

'I always work like this,' Natori said firmly.

'It'll be all right. Exorcism is for peace of mind. It's fine as long as it's done. Then everyone will feel that it has been effective.'

'Will the strange occurrences stop with just that?' asked Yoshimi's mother.

'They will. I guarantee it. It's not as if you seriously believe in this either, correct?'

The reason Natori suddenly turned to me was probably because I looked sceptical, Yoshimi thought.

'I, um... I think that exorcism, charms and things like that are conventions to preserve the community.'

'Oh?'

'This girl is studying folklore at university.'

Her mother followed up with a comment. The reason Yoshimi had looked sceptical at Natori's words was not because she did not agree with his explanation. Rather, it had just been unexpected that somebody who did exorcisms thought the same way she did.

'Could it be the university on the mountain? I was filming there yesterday.'

'I know. My friends were making a fuss.'

'Isn't that a coincidence? In order to accept some work in this area, I took some work in the area nearby.'

For a moment, Yoshimi was confused as to which work Natori meant, but it seemed that he had chosen his work as an actor in order to accept the request for an exorcism.

'Then, could you show me the way to the shop, miss? We can discuss while we walk.'

Standing up before Yoshimi could say yes or no, Natori quickly took the receipt to the register.

'U-um, wait... We'll pay!'

Yoshimi's mother wanted to go with them to the shop, but Natori turned her away and he and Yoshimi walked toward Lamp Hall by themselves. Along the way, Natori asked Yoshimi again about the thoughts, so she explained her theory in more detail.

'I think that the reason exorcism and charms are effective is that there is an agreement to have those sorts of things be effective. Conventions are like that – members of the community are obligated to believe in them. In short, exorcisms and charms bind people in the same way that the law does.'

'Then does that mean you don't believe at all in youkai or spirits?'

'Well...'

'That's fine, for most people. People are happier that way.'

'How about you, Natori-san? Though you do this sort of work.'

'Because this is my work, I believe in them.'

Yoshimi did not like the way Natori said that. It felt like he had dodged the question.

'Exorcism binds people – that is exactly it. Do you know the word kotodama?'

Yoshimi remembered hearing it in lecture.

'Saying that there are souls in words is just a metaphor, but words really do have the power to bind people. That was what people of antiquity called kotodama. We exorcists just use that theory well.'

Just as expected for an actor, his words were very persuasive.

'But Natori-san, if that's the case...' Yoshimi persisted. 'There wouldn't be any effect if you didn't gathering all of my relatives for the exorcism, right? Isn't the power of your language meant to bind us?'

'Well.'

Natori smiled playfully as he spoke.

'That's a trade secret.'

In the meantime, they had arrived at Lamp Hall. Yoshimi unlocked the door to show Natori in, when Natori gave the inside of the shop one look and said, 'Ah.'

'I see. I will continue by myself then. Things should be cleaned up by evening.'

Since Natori was very firm on the issue, Yoshimi handed over the key to the shop to him and decided to meet up with him again in the evening.

When she had started to head back to the station while thinking about where she should spend her time, she was asked for directions by a boy who looked to be in high school. Unexpectedly, at this chance meeting, that boy had asked for the directions to Lamp Hall.

'If you're looking for Lamp Hall, if you turn left there and walk north along the river you'll reach it in no time...'

She observed the boy as she replied. He was short and had a slim frame, but he had kind eyes. The cat he brought with him was round and fat, so it stood out quite a lot.

'But that shop is already...'

'Ah, I know. I just have a connection...'

A connection? What sort of connection could it be?

'Oh, OK...'

When Yoshimi looked carefully, she noticed that he was holding an envelope. For a moment, she thought, Eh? and was in disbelief, but in the end she left without saying anything. But when she thought about it, she was sure that that was that letter. The letter from her grandmother that she had found in the drawer at the register in Lamp Hall.

The mysterious letter that had been left there for so long without being sent. But that should have reached its intended recipient.

The person who had mailed that letter to the addressee on the front, Taki Shinichirou, was no other than Yoshimi herself. Just the day before, a polite reply from Shinichirou's grandchild had arrived, saying that Shinichirou had already passed away and that the letter could not be understood. Because of the fancy stationery and the shape of the letters, Yoshimi had thought that the grandchild was a well-brought-up girl who liked cute things.

What kind of divine mischief was this?

In the reply to the reply, Yoshimi had wrote to Shinichirou-shi's grandchild to say that Lamp Hall would be closed and before that, the shop would be exorcised, but there was no way for the grandchild to know that that that was to occur today. No matter how hard she thought, Yoshimi could not think of a reason for the male high school student to idly come by the shop today.

Was there a governing force controlling all the coincidences in the world, taking pleasure in trifling us who know nothing? Yoshimi felt like there was.

– Ah, I was such an idiot.

While walking on the road back to the station, Yoshimi regretted not questioning that boy back. If she had asked the reason there, it would have definitely been an unbelievable story. It could have been thought of as coincidence, but she understood that it was a "possibility" that occurred because of a series of inevitable coincidences.

Yoshimi arrived at the bus roundabout. She had thought to spend time at a bookshop or a café, but

when she was looking absentmindedly at the manga magazines on sale at the front of the bookshop, she suddenly noticed her 'misunderstanding' and said, 'Ah.'

Yoshimi felt the urge to go back to Lamp Hall now in order to confirm her misunderstanding with the high school student she met earlier.

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3

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'Natori-san! What are you here?'

After seeing somebody I was very connected to, I called out to him.

'That's my line, Natsume.'

'Look, Natsume, something unpleasant came out.'

Sparks flew between Natori-san and Sensei.

'I, um, just had something to do at this shop.'

'Oh, that's fascinating. Would you allow me to ask you about that in detail after my work?'

'When you say work, then.'

Come to think of it, I remembered Taki saying that the shop would be exorcised before it closed.

'You're going to exorcise this shop, Natori-san!?'

'One thing led to another, yes.'

'What on earth does this mean...'

'This position isn't ideal, so shall we talk inside? You'll be able to see something interesting.'

'Ah, no, I...'

Natori-san opened the door and invited me and Nyanko-sensei into Lamp Hall.

It was dim inside the shop. Immediately after entering, there was a bay window to the right, but it was half-covered by piles of wooden boxes and old books. The light that shone through illuminated the dirt and the dust. That was reflected further, dyeing the antiques standing quietly in the dim shop faint rainbow colours.

– Ah, this looks exactly like the place I saw in my dream.

After coming here, I realised for the first time that the true shape of the rainbow was the arrangement of the many lampshades lined along the ceiling. Perhaps they were the origin for Lamp Hall's name.

'What do you think? It's interesting, isn't it?'

There was the deep emotion I felt from coming to a place I saw in a dream, but the thing that

piqued Natori-san's interest wasn't reflected in my eyes.

'Hm?'

Natori-san looked dubious at my lack of response.

Then, there was suddenly clattering from an empty part of the shop. I looked there, surprised.

There were only broken wall clocks and piled up sutras and old documents.

Then, there was clattering from the opposite direction. I turned around, but I couldn't see anything strange.

'Natsume?'

Natsume tilted his head.

Then, the shop started rattling loudly.

'Uwah!'

I shouted without thinking. I see. A rattling house – also called a poltergeist. Since I could see ayakashi, it was a rare experience for me to only hear the strange noises. I could understand a little of the fear normal people felt.

When the house stopped rattling, I could suddenly hear voices.

'People have come again.'

'There's one extra.'

'A friend of the exorcist?'

'Whaat? Something that frail can't be a threat. Anyway, another ayakashi that looks like a round meat lump came too, but what is that?'

'Human or ayakashi, I won't hold back if they're the exorcist's allies.'

Multiple voices were making a commotion. It wasn't just two or three. Ten, twenty? No, there might've been more. Suddenly hearing voices from all directions was scarier than I could have imagined.

'What's wrong, Natsume? You look strange.'

'The truth is, right now, I...'

'Natsume can't see ayakashi right now.'

'What did you say!?!'

'There was a bit of an incident, so now I can only hear their voices.'

Is that so... Even though you could've seen something that you can rarely see here.'

Natori-san looked like he was thinking something over.

'Please tell me, Natori-san – what on earth is in this shop?'

'Oh, there are just a hundred or so small fry.'

Sensei replied instead of Natori-san.

'A hundred!?'

Even I had to be surprised.

It seemed that every single antique ayakashi had gathered in this shop. Items that had been thrown away and become ayakashi after months and years of taking in the spirit of the land, old furniture that beings with spiritual power rested in, creatures like the mojobake that used antiques as their nests – it seemed like a variety of youkai with different stories of how they became youkai and different reasons for coming had gathered in this small space. At any rate, one hundred youkai in this narrow shop must have made for a spectacle.

'Master.'

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice near me.

'Is that voice Hiiragi?'

'Natsume came as well? What's wrong? I'm here.'

When I looked, I saw a small pot floating by itself.

'Uwah.'

'We are here too, Natsume.'

'I won't forgive you if you came to get in Master's way.'

Those were Sasago's and Urahime's voices.

'The exorcist's shiki are back!'

'There's a new face too. They brought an ally.'

'Look! They're holding something in their hand!'

'It's a pot. It's a pot for sealing.'

'Do they plan on sealing us in there?'

'Damned exorcist and his dogs!'

The ayakashi around us were noisy. I understood that there were a variety of them from their voices – men and women, elderly and children.

'Well done. Now I can do my work.'

Natori-san took the floating pot. It was small enough to rest in the palm of his hand and had a cover.

'The pot has a charm for sealing ayakashi. I had it retrieved from my clan's cellar. Do you know the term kochuuten?'

'Kochuuten?'

'It refers to the other world that exists inside the pot. You can just think of it as a different dimension or parallel world inside the pot. There are pots in this world with spiritual power that hold worlds like that. This is one of them.'

'Do you plan on sealing all the ayakashi here inside that?'

'I won't let you hinder me, Natsume. This is my work.'

'Go home, exorcist!' said a male voice.

'We can't be sealed by something like that!' said a senior.

'Humans are conceited,' said a woman.

'We'll eat you up instead! Grrr.' This was probably a monster.

'But why? Have they harmed people?'

'Even if they don't want to, they can cause people harm. It's the job of an exorcist to exorcise them, Natsume.'

'Hmph, as if such a large number of ayakashi can be easily sealed,' said the male ayakashi.

'We won't just be sealed! Grrr,' said the monster.

'Go home if you don't want to get hurt!' said the woman.

'He's all talk. There aren't many exorcists now with that level of power,' said the senior.

Gradually, I could tell that which antiques were speaking from the direction of the voices.

'Shall I show you if I can or not?'

Natori-san said that with a nonchalant manner, and then took out several paper dolls from his pocket.

'Please wait, Natori-san!'

I immediately tried to stop him. I didn't think stopping him would be effective. Natori-san's point might be more correct. Even if I thought that, I couldn't stop myself from stepping in.

'Oh? Is that youngster an ally?' said the man's voice from the large Kakiemon platter.

'That's unlikely. I'll eat him,' said the monster's voice from the lion-dog ornament.

'Even if he's an ally, he doesn't look like he'll be much use from how frail he is,' said the daruma on the wall scroll.

'Stop, Natsume. You'll gain nothing from saving these small fry,' said Sensei.

'Just as he says, there's no point in stopping me. I'm interested in why you came here, Natsume, but I feel that things will become troublesome if I ask you. Since I don't want any obstacles to my work, I'll finish this first.'

After saying that, Natori-san scattered paper dolls in every direction. The paper dolls stuck to the door, the window, the ceiling vent and the sliding door in the back of the shop to form a barrier.

'Sasago, Urahime, Hiiragi! Protect the barrier.'

'Understood.'

I felt Natori-san's shiki disperse.

'Stooooop! I won't go in that poooooot!' shouted the Kakiemon.

'Well, it's unexpectedly comfortable. Though I haven't gone in myself.'

With a smile, Natori-san put the small pot in the middle of the earthen floor. Then, he started to recite the words for the spell.

'Ayakashi that bring calamity to mankind, obey the providence of all creation and return to darkness!'

Around me, I could hear screams. I couldn't see what was happening, but I knew that the hundred various youkai, small and large, were resisting being sucked into the pot. All the antiques were rattling violently.

It looked like it would all be finished in a moment, but that was prevented by the incident that my body had undergone. My two eyes, which had been possessed by the mojobake, suddenly started hurting.

'Agh, that hurts!'

I unconsciously pressed my hands against my eyes and crouched there.

'Natsume?'

I caught Natori-san's attention in a moment.

'What's wrong, Natsume!'

'Ugh, my eyes.'

My eyes hurt so much it felt like they would come out. As I was squatting, I met the eyes of the lion-dog ornament.

'Oh, this is interesting. This youngster is keeping mojobake in his eyes.'

'What, mojobake? I have never heard of mojobake possessing people,' said the wall scroll.

'He's not keeping them because he wants to. That clumsy idiot carelessly let them get into his eyes,' said Sensei, as if it had nothing to do with him.

'Sensei, don't say it like you're not responsible... Uwah, that hurts.'

It seemed like the mojobake had been called out by Natori-san's incantation while still stuck to my eyes.

'Natsume, are you all right!'

Natori-san stopped the incantation and rushed over to me.

'Now – the enemy's down!'

The cries for a counterattack became louder. Marbles that had been in an accessory case came flying at Natori-san. They had probably been through by the small youkai.

'Ah!'

'Master!'

I heard Hiiragi and the others' voices. The marbles fell to the ground before they could hit Natori-san.

'Protect the barrier!'

Quicker than Natori-san's voice, the paper doll barrier had been broken, and the paper dolls were falling to the floor.

'Damn it!'

There was an overwhelming number of ayakashi. Marbles, shogi pieces and go stones came flying at me and Natori-san.

'Ack, stop, you small fry! What are you doing to somebody as noble as me! Ouch.'

Faced with attacks from every direction, Sensei also seemed to be at a loss.

'Ready, everybody? Our allies the mojobake are in that youngster's eyes. Send them our spirits!'

I heard the voice of the elderly wall scroll. Then, the next moment, I felt an incomparable pain in my eyes. The mojobake were raging with the power of over a hundred ayakashi.

'Agh!'

I was on the floor in agony, holding myself up with one hand. That instant, it was absolutely not on purpose, but I reached out for help. At the same moment, I ended up knocking over Natori-san's pot forcefully. Unluckily, it hit an antique chair leg and broke with a crack.

'Ah!'

Natori-san and I exclaimed at the same time.

'There's nothing to be done. Let's retreat for now, Natsume.'

Natori-san lifted me in his arms and headed towards the entrance.

'Don't come again, humans. I can't guarantee what will happen to that youngster the next time.'

The ceramic Chinese doll threw those last words at us.

Natori-san opened the door and pushed me and Sensei out. Then, he turned around to face the shop.

'Actually, I could have made you all vanish right here instead of sealing you in that pot. The reason I didn't was because you haven't harmed humans up until now. If you harm my important friend, I won't hold back.'

After saying that plainly to the youkai, he shut the door firmly.

-

'Ah, that was terrible. Oi, Natsume. Wait – I'll eat them all up right now.'

We had left the shop for a rest, and Sensei was furious.

'Stop, Sensei.'

Natori-san locked the door and sighed as he turned to face me.

'Natsume, are your eyes all right now?'

'Ah, yes... Sorry, the pot...'

'Could you let me see?'

Natori-san drew closer to my face and looked into my eyes.

'Hm, you have some strange things in your eyes.'

'I'm not keeping them because I want to, but there was an accident.'

'This is troubling. If we try to force them out, it'll end up like that situation earlier. What a dilemma.'

Unusual for Natori-san, he looked serious. He was worried about me.

'Oi, Natsume. I really don't like this situation. I don't enjoy eating small fry, but I'll eat them all for you. That'll make that brat's work easier to clean up too. Unlock the door.'

'Like I said, stop.'

'Let me ask you to withdraw too, pig cat-kun. If you rampage in your true form in that narrow shop, it'll be a mess. Half of those antiques will be disposed of, but the other half are items of value to humans. Even if you don't worry about that, I'll clean this up by myself.'

'But that pot...'

'Ah, yes, that is a problem. That was rather valuable in itself. Even though they are all small youkai, there are not many pots that can seal a hundred of them.'

'Um... if it's something I can pay back, I would like to.'

'Haha, you don't have to concern yourself with that, but it'll take some time for me to arrange for another pot.'

'Master, then I will.'

That was Hiiragi's voice.

'Yes, could I have you get another, Hiiragi?'

'Understood.'

'Master, what shall we do?'

'Sasago and Urahime, stay here on guard. We'll be going for a bit of a walk. Natsume, could you tell me about those eyes and the reason you came to this shop until Hiiragi returns? I wonder if there's anywhere we could calm down and talk.'

'If that's what you're looking for, there's a perfect place.'

Sensei spoke up cheerfully.

At Nyanko-sensei's suggestion, we headed for the sweet shop on the other side of the river that we spotted on the way here.

'Um, sir... we do not allow animals in this shop.'

'Ah, sorry!'

In the end, Sensei couldn't enter the shop and had to wait outside.

'I'll buy your portion too for takeaway.'

I whispered in Sensei's ear and he reluctantly agreed. He went back towards the bridge that we crossed.

'Now, what sort of circumstances got those mojobake into your eyes?'

I summed up the situation for Natori-san, who looked like he was enjoying his anmitsu. There was a letter from the granddaughter of the owner of Lamp Hall to my friend's grandfather. When I opened that letter, the ayakashi flew into my eyes. The mysterious dream I saw afterwards.

'I thought that the mojobake wanted to return to that store. I thought that maybe if I returned, they would leave my eyes.'

'I see.'

Natori-san sighed and said this.

'I really shouldn't have asked. Like I said, things have become troublesome.'

'Sorry...'

'The ayakashi seem to think that the mojobake in your eyes are their trump card for preventing being sealed. Even if the mojobake try to leave your eyes, the ayakashi will send their spirits again to obstruct them.'

I sighed too.

'However, how do you yourself feel?'

'Eh?'

'Is this a troubling situation for you?'

'That's...'

'It'd be better if you couldn't see those sorts of things. Haven't you even wished for that?'

I was surprised. Natori-san had also lived with the same troubles as me and overcome them.

'I thought that before, but now.'

'Now?'

'I already know that they exist. I know that I can bond with them too. So...'

'See, it is troublesome.'

'Eh?'

'Normally, I would just have you go home and reseal those youkai myself and finish the job. Then, that shop would be destroyed and the mojobake would live in your eyes forever.'

'...'

'There was actually a possibility that that would happen. If the timing had been just a little bit different, if you were one day – no, even one late, that would have occurred.'

It was exactly as he said. Natori-san would have sealed all the ayakashi, and the mojobake would not have left my eyes even if I went to that shop that no longer would have had the presence of ayakashi.

'If that is fate, then there's nothing I can do but accept it. Like my lizard birthmark. If you were to change your mind and think it OK to continue like this, that would make my work easier. If you would just like to continue living without being able to see youkai forever.'

I said nothing for a while.

I had thought about that countless times before coming here. For example, even if I had arrived at Lamp Hall earlier than Natori-san, there was no guarantee that the mojobake would have left my eyes. I might stay like this forever. Would I be able to accept that reality?

'Anyway.'

Natori-san, after looking at me staying silent, said this to change the mood.

'That also assumes that the mojobake won't cause any further harm to you in the future. There's no guarantee for that though. There's no helping it. I'll have to change my strategy.'

'Change your strategy?'

'Yes. I'm going to talk with them.'

With a smile, Natori-san ate up the last spoonful of anmitsu.

-

I exited the sweet shop after buying sweets for Nyanko-sensei, but he was nowhere to be found. Natori-san and I crossed the bridge and returned to Lamp Hall. Nyanko-sensei was there. However, he wasn't alone – there was a woman next to him. That woman was patting Sensei's chin, and he didn't look that dissatisfied as he purred.

'Ah...'

The woman noticed that Natori-san and I had arrived and stood up to look at us.

'Eh? Why?'

Natori-san also had an unusual expression on his face.

I was also surprised to see this person. With worn-out jeans, a ponytail, and a paper bag in her hand, she was the woman I had asked for directions when I came here.

'You are...'

'My name is Sako Yoshimi.'

'Ah!'

I raised my voice without thinking.

'So you really do know?'

I knew. That was the name of the person who had sent the letter to Taki – the granddaughter of the shop's owner.

'Could you be...'

This time, the woman looked at my face as she spoke.

'Yes?'

'Taki... You're Taki Tooru, right?'

'Eh!?'

Natori-san was smirking.

'The envelope you were holding earlier was the letter from my grandmother to your grandfather, right?'

'Ah, yes, that... that's right.'

'I was sure that you were a girl. You wrote the reply on such cute stationery. But after I thought about it, the name Tooru is for boys, right?'

'No, that's... I'm...'

Natori-san, who looked amused by how flustered I was, gave some unnecessary help.

'That's right. He's my excellent assistant Taki Tooru-kun.'

'Natori-san!!!'

-

Notes:

Kotodama (言魂) means soul or power of language. The kanji for koto and dama mean language and soul respectively.

Anmitsu (あんみつ) is a type of Japanese dessert made with agar jelly, red bean paste and fruits. It is served in a bowl.



— I said, didn't I? That I wouldn't forgive you if you harmed my friend.

4

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When returning to Lamp Hall, Yoshimi giggled at her own 'misunderstanding'.

– That's right; Tooru isn't just a girl's name. Actually, it's more common as a boy's.

It would make sense for him to be Taki Shinichirou's grandson. Taki Tooru, his interest caught after reading the letter from my grandmother that I sent, probably idly came to this town to see the shop once before it closed.

– If he had just contacted me, I would've guided him there.

Yoshimi's thoughts were a bit reproachful as she briskly walked down the road, which had fewer students than usual this Sunday.

That actor exorcist should have been exorcising Lamp Hall. What did the boy do when he encountered him there? And how did Natori Shuuichi respond when he saw the boy?

She was full of curiosity.

On one hand, she also thought that it would be unfair for the boy Taki Tooru to get to see the exorcism when she herself had not been allowed to. On the other hand, she also had the hope that if it was Natori Shuuichi, it might be possible to solve the mystery of the letter.

When she reached the corner she had met the boy at, Yoshimi suddenly felt guilty. Natori Shuuichi had been particular about doing the exorcism on his own. If she went back just because she felt like it and interrupted the ceremony, he might get angry.

Yoshimi was hesitant, so she started walking more slowly, but in the end, her curiosity won out. She turned the corner at the river and headed north. She arrived. When she stood in front of Lamp Hall's door, she took a peek in through the bay window.

The window was covered by old books and wooden boxes, so she could only look between the gaps, but it did not feel like anyone was inside.

She took the doorknob into her hand and tried to turn it gently, but it was locked.

– Is it already done?

Yoshimi worried that she had just missed Natori.

If the exorcism was finished, then Natori might have already returned to the station. She was not sure about the boy.

No matter how much earlier Natori's exorcism had finished, he should still have been in the shop when the boy went. Did Natori show him inside Lamp Hall? What did he think when he saw the location of the person who had sent his grandfather such mysterious letters?

For a while, Yoshimi stood in front of the door, but there was no point in standing there forever. She was deciding whether to return home when she spotted a round pig-like creature walking nonchalantly towards her along the road lined with willows.

– That's.

It did not take much time for Yoshimi to realise that that was the pet that the boy Taki Tooru had brought along. With a two-coloured pattern on its forehead, peculiar eyes, the bell around its neck and, more than anything else, that form, it took only one look to leave a strong impression.

The cat came up casually to Lamp Hall and looked up at Yoshimi, as if saying, 'What's this guy doing?'

– It is a cat... right?

When she looked more carefully, it had an exquisitely interesting face. The reversed crescent eyes even made her feel charmed. Yoshimi timidly put out her hand.

'There, there. Good kitty. Where did your owner go?'

For a moment, the cat growled in protest, but when Yoshimi scratched underneath its chin, it suddenly stopped resisting and meowed, purring happily.

– What's with this guy – he's unexpectedly cute.

While Yoshimi was thinking about things like that, she heard the sound of footsteps. When she stood up and looked –

'Ah...'

The two people she was looking for were standing there.

'Eh? Why?'

Natori Shuuichi looked at Yoshimi dubiously.

When Yoshimi said the boy's name, he responded to it, so she questioned him confidently.

'Could you be...'

'Yes?'

'Taki... You're Taki Tooru, right?'

For some reason, the boy looked dumbfounded.

-

A few minutes afterwards, Yoshimi, Natori and the boy Taki Tooru sat with their knees opposite each other in the tatami room at the back of Lamp Hall.

According to Natori's introduction, Taki-kun was his assistant. If it was not just a joke, then it was an incredible coincidence. Yoshimi had to think once more about the mystery of chance meetings in this world.

After Natori introduced the boy, he suggested that they talk inside the shop's tatami room since it would be better than speaking outside. Yoshimi was relieved that she had not been chased away.

'What you have to say might be useful.'

That was the explanation Natori gave her.

Before opening the shop door, Taki Tooru-kun protested about something to Natori quietly, and Natori appeared to reply, but Yoshimi could not hear what was said.

When they opened the door to go inside, for a moment, rattling went throughout the shop. It was the poltergeist.

'Kyaa!'

'Quiet!'

Natori gave the command in a sharp voice. Yoshimi thought he was talking to her so she shut her mouth without thinking. When she looked around the shop, the poltergeist had settled to, just as if it had heard Natori's words. When she looked more carefully, the shop had tops, go stones and other things scattered about – it was clearly more disorderly than when she had first come here today with Natori.

'We came back to talk.'

'To... talk? You came back to talk with Natori-san, Tooru-kun?'

'Heh, well, it's something like that. Before that...'

Natori-san looked around the shop.

'Which is the oldest out of these antiques?'

'Eh? Hm, I don't know...'

Yoshimi was perplexed. Natori went back and forth on the shop's narrow path, and picked up the daruma wall scroll.

'I see, it's this daruma-san. Then you'll be the representative.'

'By representative, what...'

'It's fine, so head to the back. Let's see.'

Without answering Yoshimi's question, Natori urged her towards the back of the shop. The boy's pet cat led the way to the room furthest back, just like he was saying he was the most distinguished being here.

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The back of the shop held her grandmother's living quarters, but it was empty now that everything had been packed. It seemed that the items here had been obedient, unlike the antiques in the shop.

'Tooru-kun, put it up there. Sasago and Urahime, watch the shop.'

Natori handed over the wall scroll he had picked up earlier and handed it over to his assistant, asking him to put it on the wall. Then, Natori shut the sliding screen between the shop and the room as he gave another order to somebody, but Yoshimi did not understand what he meant.

In the tatami room that did not even had cushions to sit on, Yoshimi and Natori sat opposite each other. Taki Tooru sat idly beside Natori. The ugly cat enshrined in the very back of the room, who had been told, 'Just be quiet for a while, Nyanko-sensei,' had started eating the mizu youkan the boy had bought for him from the sweet shop on the other side of the river.

Yoshimi had never seen a cat eat mizu youkan so skilfully before.

'Um, Tooru-kun is really Natori-san's assistant, right?'

'Yes. He's excellent. He has helped me many times before.'

'Natori-san.'

'So Tooru-kun came today because of you, Natori-san?'

'No, that's incorrect. It was a complete coincidence that he came today, and I was surprised as well. That was why I halted the exorcism temporarily to hear his circumstances.'

Then, Natori added:

'He and I are very connected.'

'Then, why are you here, Tooru-kun?'

'I... I wanted to see this shop once.'

'You could have contacted me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Ah, I'm not angry. I'm grateful for your interest in my grandmother's letter. But if you contacted me, I could have gone to pick you up and shown you inside.'

'I just wanted to take a look from outside... but I should have done the proper thing and contacted you, Yoshimi-san.'

'He's still a child, so please forgive him.'

Natori sounded amused as he said that and pat the boy on the head, though the boy looked like he really did not like it.

'Well, shall we start talking? The first thing I would like to ask is the reason for the fuss the antiques are making.'

Natori suddenly began to talk, which bewildered Yoshimi.

'Eh, but, what should I say...'

While Yoshimi was at a loss for what to say, the boy Taki abruptly interrupted.

'More than half are to be tossed out?'

'Ah, yes. But how did you know? I don't think I wrote that in the letter.'

'I spoke to him about it before returning here. You always remember things so suddenly.'

Natori looked amazed as he stared at the boy.

The boy looked ashamed and said, 'Sorry.'

'Yoshimi-san, could you explain once more to him? Over half of these antiques will be disposed of, correct?'

'Yes. Some trustworthy people who also handle antiques appraised the items for us and took the ones of value off our hands, but that wasn't even half. There's nowhere to store the remaining items, so my uncles said there was nothing to be done but toss them out.'

'If that happens, they...' The boy Taki was asking Natori something.

After the boy heard Natori's reply, he thought for a while before murmuring sadly.

'I see... Then everyone will be separated.'

'That's why I said that living together in my pot would have been the best for them.'

Natori and Taki Tooru were having a conversation that Yoshimi did not understand.

'U-um, do you think that the antiques are making a racket because they don't want to be thrown out, Natori-san?'

'It appears that is the case... However, it does not appear to be the only reason.'

For a moment, it looked like Natori met the eyes of the daruma on the wall scroll.

'What do you mean?'

'It seems that they want to stay here altogether in the shop for a while longer.'

'Here?'

This time, the boy Taki replied to her.

'It appears that this was a very pleasant place.'

'That's right; it was. I liked coming here when I was a child. I think you both saw as well, but the lampshades reflecting the light from the window are enchanting...'

After saying all that, Yoshimi realised something and asked another question.

'When you said pleasant, did you mean for the antiques?'

'Ah, yes.'

The people here were an exorcist and his assistant. They were discussing on the premise that souls

rested in old things. Yoshimi felt embarrassed about her misunderstanding and thought hard before replying.

'I don't know whether these things have souls. Even if they do, I don't know what they thought about this shop. However, my grandmother loved each and every item with no discrimination.'

'I see. I can tell that the antiques miss the old lady dearly.'

Natori nodded once. Then:

'But that old lady has passed away. She won't return here again.'

After a moment, he added this:

'Then there's no reason to stay here anymore.'

The silence continued for a while. It truly felt to Yoshimi that Natori and Taki Tooru were talking in a different world and had left her behind. Then, the boy Taki suddenly murmured again.

'You can't leave until there's an end to the game...'

'End to the game?' repeated Yoshimi.

'That's my excellent assistant for you. You want to say that the antiques are waiting for some sort of conclusion and won't leave until it happens. A magnificent deduction.'

'Eh? Ah, no...'

The assistant looked downward, seeming embarrassed.

'That certainly might be a good method. Yes, let's have the conclusion to some sort of competition. Yoshimi-san, did your grandmother have anything to play or bet on in this shop?'

What a sudden change of topic, Yoshimi thought. Could it be that her grandmother had played some game here by herself that had never ended, so the antiques did not want to leave? However, her grandmother hated gambling, and when her grandchildren gathered, she played cards with them, but Yoshimi had never seen her play any other games. She could not imagine her grandmother playing something by herself.

'Things to play or bet on... No, I can't think of anything in particular. Whenever I came here, my grandmother was always reading an old book or listening to the radio...'

'How about cards, or shogi or chess?'

'There is an old shogi board and Go board in the shop, but my grandmother said that all she knew was how to move the pieces, start the game and end the game.'

'Is that so...'

'Ah, but.'

Yoshimi suddenly thought of something and turned towards the boy Taki.

'Maybe that letter.'

'Ah, that.'

It appeared that the boy had noticed as well.

'The letter that brought my assistant here?'

'Natori-san, you've also heard about the mysterious letters that my grandmother and Taki-kun's grandfather exchanged?'

'I heard about them earlier, though I haven't actually seen them.'

After saying that, Natori turned to his assistant and gave him an order.

'Show it to me, assistant-kun.'

Taki Tooru looked at the unfolded letter, and Yoshimi unintentionally let out an 'Ah'. The wavy illegible letters had disappeared and letters with a short phrase had shown up instead.

'Why...'

'You must be surprised that the letters have disappeared. Well, there was just a little trick to them.'

When Yoshimi looked more closely, the traces of the wavy letters that had left had become dark stains.

– Maybe the letters were written in ink that would disappear in bright light, like invisible ink.

That was how Yoshimi understood Natori's words.

'But in the end, I couldn't understand what these words meant...' said the boy.

'Hm. 14 – 9? The next words are stained too so I can't read them. We won't understand anything just with this. Does this have some relation to the end to that game?'

Natori said that just like he was asking somebody. Then, after a while, he muttered, '... Hm, so that's how it's going to be,' as if he had heard a reply.

'Somehow or other, it appears that the reason for the rattling in this shop is related to this letter,' he said.

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5

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Ah, why did it turn out like this? I thought as I sat next to Natori-san in the tatami room at Lamp Hall.

What would Taki say if she found out I was sitting here as Taki Tooru?

'Natori-san, why did you say that!'

Before going into the shop, I protested to Natori-san quietly.

'But an explanation would be troublesome, wouldn't it?'

That was true. In the first place, it would be very difficult to explain that coming here without having Taki contact Yoshimi-san was the reason I came. Even so...

When we opened the door and entered, for a moment, rattling went throughout the shop. The youkai were making a racket.

'Kyaa!'

'Quiet!'

Natori commanded the youkai in a sharp voice.

'Go home, go home!'

'You'll get hurt again, youngster!'

'We aren't going to leave!'

The youkai were jeering at us.

'We came back to talk.'

'To... talk? You came back to talk with Natori-san, Tooru-kun?'

'Heh, well, it's something like that. Before that...'

Natori-san looked around the shop.

'Which is the oldest out of these antiques?'

'That would be me.'

The daruma on the wall scroll replied.

'I see, it's this daruma-san. Then you'll be the representative.'

'Fine. Everyone, leave it to me.'

'Will you be OK, old man?'

'Don't be tricked by the humans!'

Natori handed the wall scroll to me and said, 'It's fine, so head to the back. Let's see.' He urged the bewildered Yoshimi-san to the tatami room in the back of the shop.

Without answering Yoshimi's question, Natori urged her towards the back of the shop.

'Hang the daruma here. Sasago and Urahime, watch the shop.'

Natori gave the order to his shiki and closed the sliding door. Then, he sat down in the middle of the tatami room. Sensei was sitting in the very back of the room. After I gave him the mizu youkan I had bought for takeaway and said, 'Just be quiet for a while, Nyanko-sensei,' I went to sit next to Natori-san.

'Um, Tooru-kun is really Natori-san's assistant, right?'

Somehow, it tickled to hear myself called by Taki's name. Yoshimi-san asked the reason I came, so I gave an awful excuse, at which point Natori-san sarcastically said I was still a child.

'Well, shall we start talking? The first thing I would like to ask is the reason for the fuss the antiques are making.'

Natori turned to the daruma and brought up the main question.

'Hm, as if we would stand for more than half of us being tossed out. We do not want to be seen as low-valued.'

The daruma acted very much like a representative as he said that, like he was protecting the youkai's dignity.

'More than half are to be tossed out?'

'Ah, yes. But how did you know? I don't think I wrote that in the letter.'

Shoot. Yoshimi-san couldn't hear the daruma's voice.

'I spoke to him about it before returning here. You always remember things so suddenly.'

'Sorry.'

Because of Natori-san's follow-up, we somehow made it. After Yoshimi-san explained where the antiques would be going, I asked Natori-san a question.

'If that happens, they...'

What would happen to them?

'That depends on the item. Even if they are to be disposed of, there are a variety of methods.'

Some would be buried, others would be taken apart, and if they wouldn't accept that fate, they would have to leave to find other vessels – they would probably all become separated.

'We came here as items that have been thrown out or lost their uses. We have no laments about the misfortunes of those bodies now. However, it would be lonely for us to have to separate from our good friends now.'

'I see... In either case, everyone will be separated.'

'That's why I said that living together in my pot would have been the best for them.'

It was exactly as Natori-san said. His skill was tearing the physical bodies from youkai and sealing them into pots. Though that would have stolen their freedom, they would have been able to be together.

'The truth is, either is fine.'

The daruma gave an unexpected answer.

'We are all prepared to accept the fate of the things we have possessed. However, we cannot leave

this place yet.'

—?

'U-um, do you think that the antiques are making a racket because they don't want to be thrown out, Natori-san?' asked Yoshimi-san.

'It appears that is the case... However, it does not appear to be the only reason.'

'This place was like paradise to us,' said the daruma.

'It seems that they want to stay here altogether in the shop for a while longer.'

'Here?'

Yoshimi-san had a blank look on her face.

'It appears that this was a very pleasant place,' I said.

'That's right; it was. I liked coming here when I was a child. I think you both saw as well, but the lampshades reflecting the light from the window are enchanting...'

After saying all that, Yoshimi-san seemed to realise something and asked another question.

'When you said pleasant, did you mean for the antiques?'

'Ah, yes.'

Yoshimi-san thought hard before replying.

'I don't know whether these things have souls. Even if they do, I don't know what they thought about this shop. However, my grandmother loved each and every item with no discrimination.'

'I see. I can tell that the antiques miss the old lady dearly. But that old lady has passed away. She won't return here again.'

'We understand that. Ichiko was a good human. Though she could not see us, it was just as if she could feel our presence. Because of her, this was paradise for us, who had been thrown away.'

The daruma's voice was tinged with sadness.

'Ichiko has passed away. Those enjoyable days will not return again.'

'Then there's no reason to stay here anymore.'

'As you say, exorcist. Once everything is finished, we will quietly let you seal us. However, none of us can leave until there is an end to the game.'

'You can't leave until there's an end to the game...'

'End to the game?' repeated Yoshimi.

'That's my excellent assistant for you. You want to say that the antiques are waiting for some sort of conclusion and won't leave until it happens. A magnificent deduction.'

'Eh? Ah, no...'

I did it again.

'That's right. The conclusion to the competition.'

Natori-san accepted the daruma's words and asked Yoshimi-san whether her grandmother had any games she played. Yoshimi-san replied that none came to mind, but then, she said this, like something had suddenly come to her mind.

'Maybe that letter.'

'Ah, that.'

I realised what she was talking about.

I looked at the unfolded letter. Natori-san nodded as well.

'Hm. 14 – 9? The next words are stained too so I can't read them. We won't understand anything with only this. Does this have some relation to the end to that game?'

'You do not even understand that, you incompetent fool? Decipher it yourself. If you come to understand it, then you can end the game instead. If you do, then we will be sealed willingly.'

'... Hm, so that's how it's going to be.'

Natori-san accepted the daruma's challenge, and said to Yoshimi-san:

'Somehow or other, it appears that the reason for the rattling in this shop is related to this letter.'

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6

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Yoshimi was surprised by the unexpected development - her grandmother's letter was related to the rattling in this shop.

'Yoshimi-san, what sort of person was Ichiko-san, the writer of this letter? Please tell us in as much detail as possible.'

'About my grandmother?' She was always a very kind grandmother to us.'

'Where was she born?'

'She was born in this house. My great-grandfather used to manage this shop. My grandmother tended the shop ever since she was young and became knowledgeable in antiques.'

'When did she marry?'

'If I'm not mistaken... when she was 23.'

Natori Yoshimi counted Natori's rapid-fire questions on her fingers as she answered them.

'My grandfather was a regular businessman with no connection to antiques at all. He first saw my grandmother as the poster girl for this shop when he was a student and recognised her from

frequent visits. When he married my grandmother, he was adopted into the family. My mother told me that my grandfather had had many rivals, but he got to marry my grandmother on the condition that he would marry into the family, since my grandmother was the only daughter. My grandfather died before I was born, but I've heard that he and my grandmother got along very well.'

'Then, did your grandmother study anything particular besides her knowledge of antiques?'

'I don't think so. She usually lived here at the shop... to the point that I've never heard of her going on trips besides to antique markets and exchange meetings... It was probably a very ordinary and peaceful life.'

'I see...'

Natori had found no clues and was deep in thought.

'But then where and when did she meet Shinichirou-sa... Shinichirou, my grandfather?'

The boy Taki presented a question.

'Who knows. Since the oldest letter I have is from forty years ago, they might have met each other then.'

'So she was already married,' said Natori.

'There aren't enough clues. If we at least knew the other letters' numbers.'

'Ah, if that's what you need.'

Yoshimi remembered that she had brought the notebook she had copied the numbers from her grandmother's diary into.

'Would this be helpful?'

Natori took the notebook and flipped through it.

'Very much so,' he replied.

'These are in chronological order, yes? The left column is from Shinichirou-san's letters, and the right are the numbers that Ichiko-san sent in reply...'

'Has anything become clear, Natori-san?'

'I see. The first numbers are 4 – 16. Next are 16 – 16, and then 3 – 4...'

'There seems to be no regularity.'

'In the letters from Shinichirou-san, there were ● symbols written before the number, correct?'

'This letter has them too – look.'

The boy Taki showed the letter he had brought. The letter certainly did have '○ 14 – 9' written on it.

'The largest number is nineteen. Oh, that's how it is. I see.'

Natori suddenly stood up.

'It has become clear to me, Watson-kun,' he said to his assistant.

'Is that true, Natori-san!'

'I'm going to look for something that should be in this shop, so wait here.'

After saying that, Natori opened the sliding door and headed towards the shop crowded with antiques.

Suddenly, there was a loud rattling from the shop the moment Natori shut the sliding door.

'Natori-san!'

The boy Watson stood up, opened the sliding door and rushed towards the shop.

'Stay back!'

Yoshimi heard Natori's voice.

Yoshimi did not know what had happened.

'Natori-san, Tooru-kun!'

Just as Yoshimi thought she would go after them, someone caught her foot from behind, making her fall.

– Eh?

A round figure leapt over Yoshimi's fallen back and jumped into the shop.

– The cat?

The moment the cat the boy owned jumped into the shop, Yoshimi heard a voice.

'Stop, Sensei!'

Right after that, she heard Taki yell, 'Uwah!' Then there was the sound of somebody falling, and the rattling stopped.

When Yoshimi finally stood up and tottered over to the shop, Taki Tooru had fallen to the earthen floor, with his cat watching attentively beside him.

'Tooru-kun!?'

'It can't be helped – even though I told him to stay back.'

'Tooru-kun, hang in there!'

Yoshimi ran over and sat him up. However, he appeared to have fainted.

'He's fine... probably. He isn't as weak as he looks.'

'What on earth happened!?'

The shop was in even more disorder than before. The books and scrolls, in particular, were open and unrolled, scattered everywhere as if a sudden gust had blown through.

'I was going to borrow this for a bit when my intentions were misunderstood.'

Natori said that as he showed me an old go board.

'A go board?'

'Yes. This was the game that Ichiko-san and Shinichirou-san played.'

Yoshimi suddenly realised – there were nineteen lines horizontally and vertically. Those numbers represented the placement of the go stones on the nineteen-by-nineteen grid.

'Shinichirou-san was ●, the player who goes first, and Ichiko san was ○, the player who goes second.'

Yoshimi remembered seeing that go board. It was always placed near the register. Though the go stones were lined up beautifully, she could not remember ever seeing her grandmother move them.

'You can't touch this.'

When Yoshimi had mischievously moved around the go stones to play, that was what her grandmother had said to scold her.

'Before your grandmother died, this was probably lined with go stones, but your relatives may have cleaned them up.'

'But my grandmother didn't play go...'

'She might have practised secretly.'

Was that it? If it were, did Yoshimi's grandmother lie in front of her granddaughter?

'In any case, I think I will bring this to an end soon.'

'Bring this to an end?'

'I'm saying that I'll bring the game to an end too.'

After Natori said that, he continued, 'Let's see... Something for the vessel.'

Natori's eyes landed on the dream catcher Yoshimi had around her neck.

'You're wearing something nice. Could I borrow that for a short while?'

'Eh? This?'

Natori took the charm necklace from Yoshimi and compared that with the go stone container next to the go board. 'This will be fine,' he said with a nod.

'I'll borrow the notebook you showed me earlier. Yoshimi-san, please bring your grandmother's notebook and Shinichirou-san's letters quickly.'

'Eh? But.'

'Please. Hurry!'

Yoshimi did not understand. She really just wanted to stay here and hear the whole situation. However, something had happened and Taki Tooru-kun had collapsed, and Natori's order raised the tension, so she hurried.

'I understand. I'll bring them right away.'

After saying that, she flew out of the room. For a moment, she thought she might have just been politely chased out, but since she could not go right back into the shop after exiting it, she decided to run home. When she left the shop and closed the door, she heard Natori's sharp voice from inside.

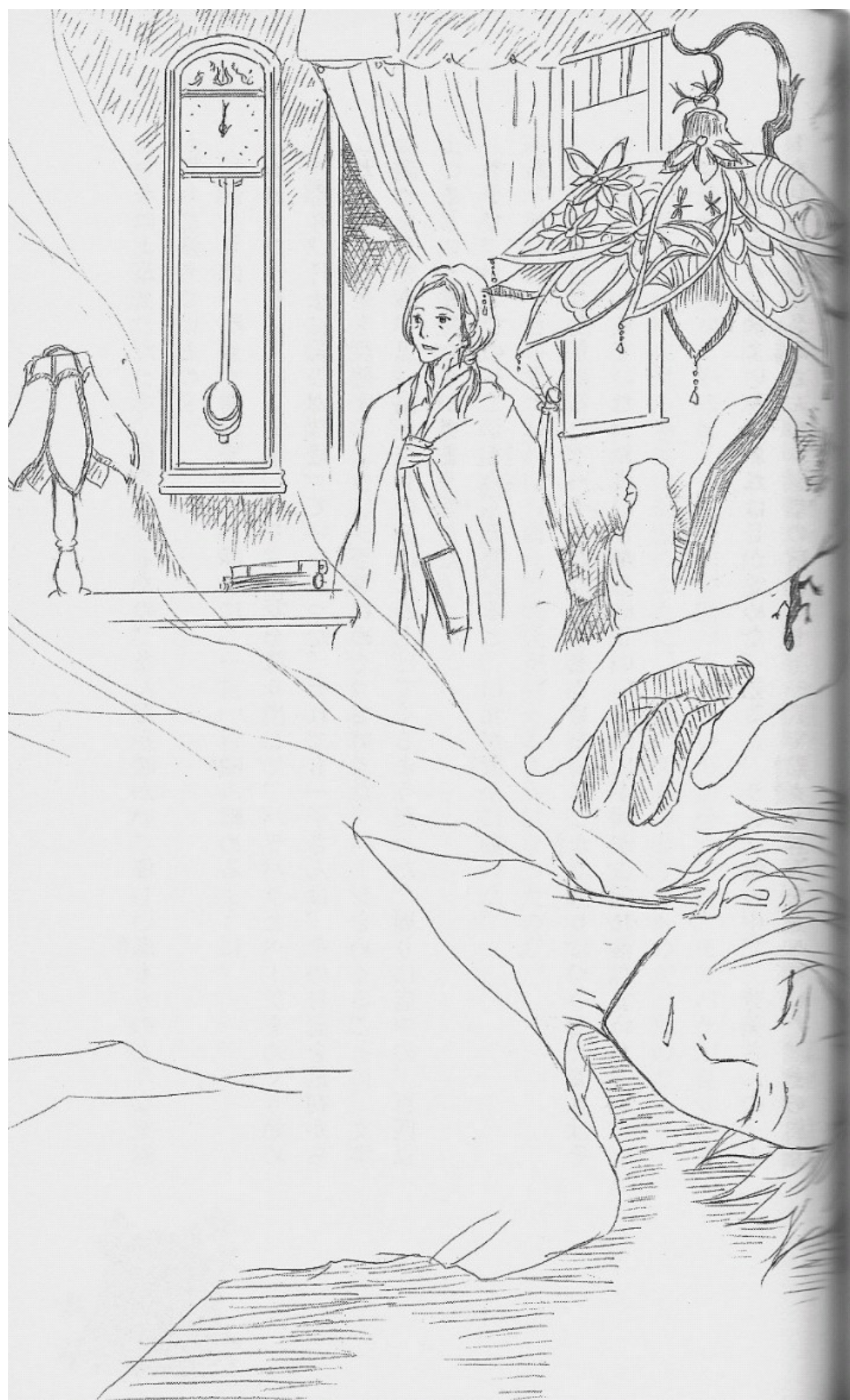
'I said, didn't I? That I wouldn't forgive you if you harmed my friend.'

When Yoshimi returned, everything had finished, just as she had thought it would.

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Notes:

Mizu youkan (水ようかん) is a type of Japanese dessert made of red bean paste, agar and sugar to form a jelly (the youkan). Mizu youkan has more water in it.





— Even if it's somebody you'll only meet once in your whole life, that person might be somebody you have a mysterious connection to

7

-

ssssh *ssssh* *ssssh*

– Rain?

The bell on the door rang, and somebody came in.

In the back of the shop, there was a register, where a young woman was reading a book.

– Yoshimi-san?

No, she looked like her, but they were different when he looked more closely. The young woman glanced up at the customer but didn't seem to care much and lowered her eyes back to her book. The guest was a student. The young woman and the student were both wearing shirts that looked like they would show up in old films.

– Is this a dream shown to me by the mojiwake?

(Natsume, open your eyes... Natsume!)

(Oi, Natsume, get a hold of yourself! It'd be shameful to lose to those small fry!)

It felt like it was coming from very far, but I could hear Natori-san's and Nyanko-sensei's voices.

That's right. After Natori-san told me to wait in the tatami room and went into the shop, I heard the jeering of over a hundred youkai and ran after him into the shop.

When I opened the sliding door, marbles, tops, shogi pieces and go pieces were flying towards Natori-san. It was a hard struggle even for Natori-san.

'Stay back!'

The youkai started throwing small stones at me too.

'Ugh, stop – !'

Then, Sensei jumped in and changed into his large ayakashi form. It would have been bad if Sensei went full out here.

'Stop, Sensei!'

Right after I yelled, the documents and scrolls in the shop flew up all at once, and countless mojiwake flew out. It was a swarm incomparable in number to the mojiwake that had lived in the letter from Ichiko-san.

The power of more than a hundred youkai became the driving force to move the mojiwake.

The swarm of black letters roared and flew towards my eyes. When I thought that everything in front of me had turned black, an intense pain surged through my eyes, and the shock ran through my body.

When I collapsed there, Sensei let out a furious howl and silenced the surrounding youkai. That was all I remembered. After that, it seems like my consciousness slipped away from me and I fainted.

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The student in the dream slowly looked around the shop. The lampshades hanging from the ceiling dyed the shop in fairytale-esque rainbow colours. He came near the register and the young woman finally raised her head to look at the customer.

'Oh, you're drenched, student-san.'

'Sorry. The rain came down so suddenly. Oh, but I'm not just window-shopping.'

'It's fine, even if it is window-shopping. Take shelter from the rain. Ah, shall I lend you an umbrella?'

'I'm not a student from around here.'

'Is that so?'

The young woman handed over a hand towel, saying, 'Please take this,' and the student said thanks as he dried off his soaked clothes.

'Then, was there some sort of reason for your trip here?'

'Yes, I had some business at the university on the hill. I heard that many documents about youkai were kept here, so I came to take a look.'

'Youkai, is it?'

'Yes, it's my dream to meet with youkai.'

I could see the student's eyes sparkling.

'There are some interesting research topics.'

'So, um, if you have any documents related to youkai or antiques with interesting histories, would you please show them to me?'

'Things related to youkai, hm.'

The young woman quietly got up from the register and started looking through the nearby antiques.

'How about this?'

The young woman picked up an ornament from the back and showed it to the young man.

'That's a statue of a kirin. That's more of an auspicious beast than a youkai.'

'Auspicious beast?'

'Maybe you'll understand if I say divine messenger?'

'Well. Sorry, I'm still learning.'

The young woman was a bit ashamed.

'Well, there might be something in the old scrolls underneath it.'

After moving away a few of the boxes that had been piled up, there was an old go board with go stone containers. The young woman was about to take the box of scrolls when she picked up the white and black go stone containers.

'Please pick up that go board for a bit,' she asked the student.

The student picked up the go board and looked around for somewhere to put it down. Since there was a splendid art nouveau table nearby, he placed it there. The young woman was about to put the go stone containers next to it, when she bumped into the shoulder of the student, who was turning around. The moment she stumbled with a yelp, the cover fell off the go stone container and one black stone spilled out.

'Ah, sorry!'

The black stone spun on top of the go board like a top. Just when it looked like it was about to fall off the edge, it turned around and went back to dancing in the centre of the board.

'Well now.'

The two watched the stone's dance on top of the board for a while, but the young woman finally placed the go containers on the side of the table and pushed down the stone with her finger, saying, 'There.'

'Wow,' said the student admiringly.

That was because, looking from the young woman's side, the small black stone was placed exactly at the intersection of the fourth row from the top right corner – the point called the star. That was a standard first move, but the young woman just shrugged and went back to work.

The student looked at the top of the board for a little longer, but took a white stone on a whim and placed it on the diagonal line from the black stone. The go board made a crisp *snap* sound. Hearing that sound, the young woman turned around to look at the board. The young woman picked up a black stone and randomly – truly randomly – placed it in a corner.

The student hmm-ed as he placed the white stone on the diagonal line from it. White and black stones took up positions of the go board two-by-two. After seeing that, again, the young woman randomly placed a black stone. Again, the student hmm-ed as he placed a white stone.

snap ... *snap* ... *snap* ...

That pleasant sound echoed through the shop. The rainbow light from the lampshades enveloped

them in its fairytale-esque rays. At some point, the two completely forgot about searching for things related to youkai and faced each other at the go board.

Maybe it was because the opening battle went in the standard manner, but the tempo advanced well. The student would look at his opponent's move and make noises to himself as he placed the stones, but the young woman didn't behave as if she were thinking at all and looked like she was always placing the stone randomly. Sometimes, there would be pauses where she waited with the black stone in her hand, but rather than thinking, it was more like she was waiting to understand where to place the stone. Then, there would be a moment where it felt like something had just come to her and she would simply place the stone down with a snap. It was like this from the beginning to the end, but even so, the moves seemed somehow to be fairly good, so the student playing her would sound admired and surprised.

'The truth is, I've just started playing go.'

The student said that like an excuse.

'When you continue placing stones like this, there are outcomes you never expected afterwards, right? It's interesting. I think that go is a game which strains your ears to notice series of coincidences and fates.'

'Series of coincidences and fates?'

I also vaguely understood what the student meant. To put the game of go simply, I knew that it was a battle for territory. Tanuma had taught me before. Tanuma knew a lot about shogi and go, but just from listening to him, I felt that go was difficult. The tactics and strategy rather than the rules. The battle at the beginning of the game around the corners. At one glance, the stones looked like they were placed in faraway positions completely unrelated to each other – but that was offence and defence to take the territory in the corners for your own, so Tanuma had said. Within the edges of the small universe of the go board, black and white predictions scattered sparks everywhere. The difficulty lay in how, when the game developed, stones that were placed for a battle in a completely different place would unexpectedly be caught up in a fight for territory elsewhere.

'Placing the stones with that intention from the start is called "fuseki".'

I remembered Tanuma's words. However, when I actually looked at the game in front of my eyes, I could only think of it as complete coincidence. There were definitely many outcomes that even the people who actually placed the stones hadn't expected. Just as if events that happened here and there in this world were reappearing. The coincidences and fates that occur in this world where people who live in completely different places unexpectedly meet up because of some mysterious connection – I could see their echoes reappearing in the game called go, like shadows dancing on the go board.

Meanwhile, the game was moving steadily from the go board's edges to the battle in the centre. The entanglement of the stones became even more complex, and both the student and the young woman took more time to play their moves.

'Hm.'

The student was holding a white stone while puzzling over where to put it when a clock on the wall rang to announce that it was evening. Surprised, the student looked at the clock.

'Oh no – it's time for the express train.'

'Sorry, it seems like I've kept you.'

It appeared that the rain had already stopped.

'No, I was the one who got so absorbed in the game. Um... you're very strong.'

'Were they good moves?'

'Yes, they were. I was surprised at how knowledgeable your placement of the stones was.'

When she heard that, the young woman looked a bit surprised as well.

'Did somebody teach you?'

'No, I.'

The young woman gave an evasive answer and shrugged with a smile. It seemed like the student didn't understand what that smile meant and he tilted his head, but in the end, it appeared that he was more concerned with the time.

'I'm sorry for leaving in the middle of the game. It was fun. Bye.'

'Same here. Come again anytime.'

The student said farewell and opened the door. Along with the chime of the bell, it smelled just faintly of the street after the rain. However, once the door closed to hide the figure of the student running off, the shop returned to being a quiet world.

The young woman let out a deep sigh.

She was about to clean up the go board and picked up a few stones when she impulsively changed her mind and left it as it was. She looked up at her surroundings. Her gaze wandered around the shop like she was searching for someone.

'Grandpa...?'

Then, she shook her head, as if to say there was no way and returned to the register, letting her eyes fall on the book she was reading again.

Her eyes probably couldn't see anything but several lampshades hanging from the ceiling. However, I could see them. The figures of the little youkai that had sat on the lampshades and watched the game between the student and the young woman the whole time.

-

Then, my surroundings overlapped, like a scene change in a film. It was the same Lamp Hall, but the atmosphere was different somehow. A few of the antiques' positions had changed, and a lot of

the paint on the door and the window frame had come off. Behind the register, there stood a middle-aged woman sitting with a baby in her arms. Though she had aged, traces of how she looked when she was young had remained. She was the young woman from before. The table that the go board had been on when the young woman and the student had played might have been sold because it was nowhere to be seen.

The door opened with the chime of a bell.

A hat-wearing gentleman came in. While comforting the baby, the woman raised her head to look at the customer. The gentleman walked through the shop slowly while looking at the various antiques lined up.

When the gentleman noticed the worn-out chair and wooden box full of ceramic plates and broken toys, At the spot where the art nouveau table had been before, I saw him let out a slightly lonely sigh.

But when he went farther in and approached the register, the gentleman's face changed.

He looked like he couldn't believe it when his gaze fell not on the woman holding the baby but the object next to her. There stood the go board from that time. The black and white go stones were placed properly on the go board just as they had been twenty years ago, as if time had stopped and waited for him.

The gentleman said, 'Ah...' quietly in a voice not quite loud enough to be a voice. His hands were trembling. His eyes were suddenly clouded with tears. I could tell that the gentleman was full of emotions difficult to restrain.

'?'

The woman holding the baby looked at the gentleman oddly.

The gentleman took off his hat and showed his face to the woman. The woman looked for a while at that face covered with stubble and those kind eyes, when she suddenly smiled.

'Did you make it in time for the express train? Student-san.'

'Yes, thanks to you.'

'I'm glad.'

The rainbow light that hadn't changed since twenty years ago enveloped them.

snap ... *snap* ... *snap* ...

For a little while after that, Lamp Hall once again reverberated with the pleasant sound of stones being placed on a go board.

'You're married then.'

'Yes. And you, student-san?'

'I'm also married.'

'I thought you wouldn't come again.'

'Sorry, I made you wait a considerably long time.'

'Are you still searching for youkai?'

'Yes. I plan on searching for my whole life.'

'It'd be nice if you found them.'

'Yes.'

Their game didn't take as long as last time. The white stones steadily directed the game and gained total control of the centre.

'Ah...'

Finally, the gentleman stopped his hand mid-air with a white stone in it.

'What's wrong?'

'If I play this, it'll be my win. Probably.'

'Is that true?'

The gentleman appeared taken aback as he looked at the woman.

'I don't know the rules.'

The gentleman was shocked as he stared at the woman, but he seemed to decide that was a slight joke and took it to mean she only didn't know how to end the game.

'There are two ways to end a game of go. One is for one player to admit defeat and resign. The other is like this one, where there are no more places to play.'

After saying that, the gentleman placed the last stone.

'It's the end of the game then?'

The woman tilted her head, since there were still many spaces on the board. However, the gentleman explained that those were places where stones had been captured or places where stones couldn't be played since even if they were, they would just be captured. The woman nodded along to his explanation as she listened with a face that looked like she understood parts of his explanation but not all.

'When there are no more places to play, the person who plays the last move asks, "It's the end of the game, isn't it?" Then, the other person replies, "It's the end of the game." Then the game is finished.'

'Then, it's the end of the game,' the woman replied.

According to the gentleman's explanation, in go, after placing that last stone, in order to determine the outcome, there was a little ceremony. Both players used the stones they captured and filled in each other's territory, and to make the territory easier to count, they moved the stones and lined

them up neatly in a rectangular shape. After they did, it was clear even to me that white had a larger territory than black.

'Hmm, white has a hundred and nine moku and black has ninety-six, which makes a thirteen moku difference. Including the komi, it would still be a difference of eighteen and a half, so it's my win.'

'That's true. We've finally reached a conclusion.'

The woman smiled while admiring their game.

However, I could see some beings that didn't accept that conclusion.

'That's why I said this earlier! It was wrong to play at tengen.'

'No, the nobi three moves earlier was wrong. We should have done a hane.'

'Being too fixated on the corners was no good. I said to abandon them and hurry to the centre.'

'That's why I said to use an uttegaeshi!'

The youkai in the gallery had increased in number since twenty years ago. The antique youkai had been enchanted by this pleasant shop and gathered one by one. They all voiced their opinions as they told the woman who didn't know the rules where to play.

But how?

That secret lay in the lampshades hanging from the ceiling. The small youkai adjusted the angle of the lamp shades and shined light on to the go board. Green, red and blue, when those three colours of light hit the board, a point of white light would appear. Twenty years ago, the young woman who hadn't known the rules probably just decided to try placing the stone on that point. Then, that young woman had thought it was just coincidentally a standard move. However, there were too many different opinions from the youkai telling her where to play now, so they had been defeated by their opponent in an instant.

'Um, if you wouldn't mind, could I buy this go board in commemoration?' asked the gentleman.

'I didn't buy anything that last time I came either, so I'd like to apologise.'

'If that's the case, there's something you might like here.'

The woman took out some ancient documents from the back of the shelf and handed them over instead of the go board.

'I kept them here because I thought you might come back. This is literature about youkai from the Edo period.'

'Oh! That's remarkable.'

The gentleman's eyes were sparkling like a boy's.

'Of course, I can sell you the go board as well, but... the truth is, that's something my grandfather often played on.'

'Ah, it's a memento...'

'It's not so much as that, but I often saw him sitting behind the register and playing by himself when I was still young.'

'He wasn't alone. I played as his opponent.'

One small youkai said that, hanging from a lampshade.

'I was the only one here then.'

Of course, the gentleman and the woman couldn't hear that voice.

'Actually, last time and this time, I thought that my grandfather might have been letting me play.'

'I see...'

The woman only said that, so the gentleman seemed to just take what she said as a metaphor.

'It's regrettable that we must part,' the gentleman said.

'If you would like, how about another game?'

'Eh?'

'That's just what I wanted! As if I could let this end with my loss! I'll win next time.'

The youkai became excited.

'However, I don't actually have any more time today. I have an appointment to meet somebody who has encountered youkai in the next town. Why don't we do this?'

The gentleman drew out a go board on a memo pad and wrote numbers along the sides. After asking for the shop's address and the woman's name, he bought the documents and left. Like this, Taki's grandfather – Shinichirou-san – and Yoshimi's grandmother – Ichiko-san – started exchanging letters.

-

After that, the mojibake showed me flashbacks like a revolving lantern.

This was probably a few days after Shinichirou-san left. Ichiko-san received the envelope from the post box in front and returned. After she opened the envelope and read the numbers, her face lit up and she placed one black stone on the go board by the register.

She stared at the go board. However, she couldn't see the light she usually did.

'It's standard to place on the diagonal line!'

'No, it'd be safer to place directly beneath it.'

'You don't understand. In go, you have to read ahead.'

The youkai were fighting and made no progress. Ichiko-san, who didn't know that, sat in seiza. In the end, it took the youkai a few days to come to a decision.

When Ichiko-san stood up to close the shop for the evening and glanced over on a whim, the brilliant lampshades bathed in the light of the setting sun illuminated the go board with its rainbow light, and she saw that only one point was indicated with a white light. Ichiko-san let out a happy cry and took out stationery and an envelope right away to write a reply.

The game by letter that started in this manner took more and more time for consideration as it advanced. Perhaps because of Shinichirou-san's tendency to go on trips, the span between letters grew longer and longer. At some point, Ichiko-san, and probably Shinichirou-san as well, became used to it, and it became a long, long game that continued for nearly forty years. That leisurely rhythm probably matched them well, I thought, watching Ichiko-san smile brightly every time a letter arrived.

Ichiko-san's face was etched with more wrinkles every year, and her family also grew in number. Her child was followed by a younger brother and sister, and that younger sister gave birth to a daughter – Yoshimi-san.

The points on the go board slowly but steadily filled up. Probably both of them felt that the end of the game was coming. The span between letters grew even longer. Even after the youkai had shown her what to play and she had written the move in a letter, Ichiko-san sometimes left the letter in the envelope for days without sending it, as if she was hoping to make the game last as long as possible.

However, the day finally came. After receiving the last letter from Shinichirou-san and placing the black stone according to the numbers written, Ichiko-san looked taken aback. After doing this for so long, she probably remembered almost all of the rules. Another possibility is that she might have just remembered the explanation for how to end the game from that time very well. Ichiko-san wrote the position that the youkai had indicated on the letter. Then, she added this short sentence: 'It's the end of the game then.' She put the letter in an envelope. However, Ichiko-san didn't seal it and left it in her drawer without doing anything to suggest she was going to take it out. Sometimes she would open the drawer, open the envelope and take a peek. A sad smile would appear on her lips and she would close it again. She did that many times, but in the end, she didn't send it.

After a few years, Ichiko-san received a black-bordered card. It was the notice for Shinichirou-san's death. Somebody in the Taki family probably saw Shinichirou-san's address book and sent it. The moment Ichiko-san laid her eyes on it, she dropped the card and broke down crying right there. When she finally stood back up, she took out the letter she hadn't sent from the register's drawer, and whispered one word:

'Sorry.'

The letter went back to the drawer. The notice for Shinichirou-san's death was placed in a box for postcards, that probably disappeared somewhere during cleaning. When Ichiko-san died, her relatives didn't see it.

This was just about the time the notice for Shinichirou-san's death came. Yoshimi-san, who was

still small, has come to her grandmother's to play and impulsively scattered the stones on the go board.

'What are you doing, Yoshimi!'

Ichiko-san held up her hand, angry. Yoshimi-san, who hadn't been scolded often before, started crying in place. Ichiko-san looked like she regretted it immediately and lowered her hand. Then, she hugged Yoshimi-san as she spoke to her.

'You can't touch this, Yoshimi. These black stones and white stones are full of the memories of your grandmother and another person.'

While she said that, Ichiko-san took out her diary and diligently lined up the stones according to the numbers she had written down. Yoshimi-san had fallen asleep at some point while on her grandmother's lap, but Ichiko-san continued to speak.

'This is what your grandmother thinks. The connections between people are mysterious. Your grandmother and Taki-san only met directly twice in our whole lives, but I can call him one of my very important close friends. It was a coincidence that Taki-san ran into this shop to take shelter from the rain, and it was also a coincidence that he spotted the go board, but there's a reason things turned out that way. Taki-san came because he had something to do at the university on the mountain for youkai research, and I placed the stone on the go board that time because I remembered my grandfather and felt nostalgic... People's bonds must be created by straining your ears to notice series of coincidences and fates like those ones. So Yoshimi, you have to strain your ears for connections between people like that too. Even if it's somebody you'll only meet once in your whole life, that person might be somebody you have a mysterious connection to.'

The young Yoshimi-san had forgotten that she cried and was sleeping peacefully. However, her grandmother's words must have reached the deepest part of Yoshimi-san's heart. That's what I think.

-

Then, ten years passed by. Ichiko-san had aged a lot and became prone to falling ill, and she sometimes had to be hospitalised. During those times, the shop would be closed, and the youkai left in the dark shop were dying of boredom. It might have been because they wanted somebody to notice them, but sometimes they would rage about and rattle the house, though nobody was there to notice. Then, Ichiko-san returned from the hospital. The youkai were overjoyed. However, Ichiko-san no longer had the strength to open the shop by herself. The truth was that she had made a request to the doctor at the hospital to return home. She had said that if she was going to die, she wanted to die here.

In the day, relatives came in turns to take care of her. Ichiko-san asked them to open the store. She would sit behind the register and look at the antiques. This was the scenery she had always looked at. Some items were sold and left, while new items came. However, to her, they were all like friends.

It was night.

The shop had fallen silent. Suddenly, Ichiko-san, who had been sleeping in the back, opened the sliding door and came in.

That day, Yoshimi-san's mother had just come to take care of her and talked nostalgically about her childhood. That might have still been in Ichiko-san's heart. She had felt something strange in her heart and woken up. Paying no attention to the fact that it was the middle of the night, she came into the shop. Then, she turned on the largest lamp – the queen. The shop was died in rainbow colours.

'Hello, is it grandfather?'

In that shop that shouldn't have had anybody in it, Ichiko-san started speaking to somebody.

'Or...'

Ichiko-san stopped speaking, as if she was waiting for a response, and then she started speaking again.

'At first, you know, I thought that my grandfather was the one telling me where to place the stones, because my grandfather loved this go board. However, while I continued sending and receiving letters and lining up the stones, I felt it was something else...'

The youkai around Ichiko-san were listening to her speak.

'My grandfather often said this. There are undoubtedly souls resting in old things. You are those souls, aren't you? I mean, I can feel you now. I feel surrounded by kind and warm presences.'

The youkai said nothing and listened. As if they were quietly taking in the words one by one.

After that, Ichiko-san returned to the register, took out her diary and started flipping through it. She didn't have the strength to diligently read it anymore. Even so, Ichiko-san properly turned the pages to mull over that diary from the beginning of her life to now. Each time she turned a page, even if she couldn't read the words, memories filled her heart. In the shop, over a hundred youkai gathered around her.

Finally, when she had turned all of the pages, her lips moved slightly.

'Thank you.'

The diary slipped out of her hand. Ichiko-san closed her eyes there and fell into an eternal sleep. I continued watching her. At some point, tears had welled up and started falling from my eyes...

-

snap ... *snap* ... *snap* ...

The pleasant sort of go stones being placed woke me up. When I looked, Natori-san was sitting in front of the register while looking at Yoshimi-san's notebook, placing the go stones quietly by himself in Lamp Hall. Around him, over a hundred antique youkai had gathered and were holding

their breath as they watched him. Sasago and Urahime were standing near Natori-san as if protecting him.

I understood that not that much time had passed since I fainted. The dream the mojibake showed me had probably flashed by in a moment, like the memories of the past I saw when returning a name. It seemed like that gigantic swarm of mojibake had left my eyes along with the tears I shed.

'Finally awake, you weakling?'

Nyanko-sensei suddenly kicked my head.

'That hurts. Stop it, Sensei.'

'Well, it seems like you've returned to the world of sight.'

Natori-san said that while shrugging.

'Ah, where's Yoshimi-san?'

'She was a bit in the way so I had her leave. If you're awake, that's perfect – come and help me, Taki Tooru-kun.'

'Please stop calling me that name. You don't need to now, right?'

'Then Natsume, put black stones in the positions of the numbers I say. I was just about to reproduce the game.'

'Ah, OK.'

'The conclusion they wanted was the conclusion to this game of go. You'll be playing the youkai.'

Since Natori-san didn't know that I had seen everything in the dream, he explained properly for me.

'Wait. When you said the boy was the grandson of that man, was it not a lie?'

The daruma on the wall scroll which had been put back in its original position at some point made an objection.

'However, that doesn't change the fact that he has a connection with him. Right, Natsume?'

'Er, yes.'

Though I hadn't met him directly, I definitely had a connection with him. He was the person I had been watching in a dream up until a bit earlier.

'Then that is acceptable. In any case, the place to put the stone has been decided.'

The game continued, with Natori-san playing on behalf of the youkai and Ichiko-san, and me playing on behalf of Shinichirou-san. We placed the stones according to the numbers Natori-san read out. We placed over two hundred stones in total. Finally, the time to place the last stone had come.

'14 – 9.'

Natori-san placed the white stone there and asked me a question.

'It's the end of the game, isn't it?'

The part in Ichiko-san's letters that had been stained and illegible, 'I s t h e n f e m e i n i t', had been those words written in kanji and katakana.

'It's the end of the game.'

I replied. The shop was silent. Finally, Nyanko-sensei lost his temper and yelled out.

'So who won!'

'Do not rush. Now, humans, count each other's territory.'

'OK. Natsume, could you move the go stones like we've been asked?'

Since I had just seen how to do it in a dream earlier, I understood the most part. First, I alternately placed the stones captured from the other player in the territories that belonged to neither player called dame. Then, I moved the stones which were placed unevenly to make a shape easier to count.

'OK. Black has ten, twenty, thirty... sixty-eight moku, and white has... sixty-two moku.'

'Black has six more moku then.'

'D-did we lose...?'

The surrounding youkai were astir.

'No, with the current official roles, in order to take away the advantage of playing first, black takes a handicap of six and a half, so white wins by a different of half a moku.'

There were shouts of joy throughout the shop.

'Yes, yes! It's our win.'

I suddenly noticed I felt Ichiko-san's feeling as I looked at the youkai. While smiling at their exhilaration, I also felt lonely now that the game that had gone on for so long had finally ended.

-

'We promised. You may now seal us.'

After clamouring for a while, the daruma said this to Natori-san in good sportsmanship.

'Yes, allow me.'

Natori-san placed the two go stone containers, black and white, in the middle of the earthen floor of the shop. He took off their covers, placed the dream catcher charm Yoshimi-san had been wearing on top of the white go stone container and placed the letter from Ichiko-san I had brought on the black one, saying it stood in for a vessel.

'Black for the mojobake, and white for everything else. That's fine, yes?'

At first, the youkai didn't seem to understand what Natori-san had said. However, after a way, the meaning came to them. Natori-san would seal them in the go stones instead of the pot.

'I see, we will go into the go stones... If that is the case, there might come a time when we will be able to play with someone again.'

Natori-san recited the incantation.

'You who possess these antiques, leave that form behind and return to these stones!'

First, the weak mojibake went through the letter and were sucked into the black stones.

Then, the little youkai were sucked one by one into the white stones.

'I am glad that you were the exorcist. Thank you.'

When he was sucked in last, I heard the daruma say that.

Once everything was finished, Natori-san took the dream catcher and letter and covered both of the go stone containers again. The feeling of fullness I had felt from around me up until earlier had disappeared all at once.

'Now, I'm leaving, so give this back to Yoshimi-san for me.'

After Natori-san said that, he handed the dream catcher to me.

'Also, tell her that these are something she should keep if possible, assistant-kun.'

Natori-san pointed at the go board and go stone containers as he said that. I also agreed with his view.

After taking a breath, Natori-san looked at me again.

'At any rate, I'm glad you're safe.'

He said that while smiling with clear eyes.

'Well, Natsume, I'll leave the rest to you.'

'Ah, please wait. How should I explain to Yoshimi-san?'

'Do as you think appropriate.'

Just before Natori-san opened the door to leave:

'Ah, yes, yes, though this is a secret to them,' he said, pointing at the youkai in the go stone containers. He continued at a lower volume.

'The rule for white's win with the six and a half difference shouldn't have been made that long ago. Up until then, it was five and a half, and before that it was four and a half...'

'Then.'

'Yes. If following the rules from when they started the game, it would be Shinichirou-san's win.'

'Hmm.'

Then who won in the end?

'Well, it doesn't really matter.'

After saying that, Natori-san really left.

Only Nyanko-sensei and I were left in the shop.

'Ah, yes, there's still that.'

Nyanko-sensei went back to the tatami room to finish the mizu youkan he had started eating.

'This time, you were no use at all, Sensei.'

'What did you say, Natsume!'

'No, nothing.'

Meanwhile, the door chimed open, and Yoshimi-san rushed in, panting.

'I brought it, Natori-san!Eh?'

'Ah, welcome back.'

'Where's Natori-san?'

'That's, um...'

I gave an apology after a quiet sigh.

-

8

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Yoshimi was really irritated when she thought how she was tricked in the end.

When she brought back her grandmother's diary, just as Natori had told her to, he had already left, and only his assistant Taki Tooru was waiting. His pet cat was eating mizu youkan in the back.

According to the boy Taki's explanation, her grandmother Ichiko and his grandfather Shinichirou's game had reached an end, and nothing possessed the antiques in this shop anymore, meaning the exorcism had succeeded. Probably, there would not be any more rattling when they carried the items.

The usual sceptical Yoshimi could not believe it when she was told something like that so suddenly. However, the truth was that the mysterious presence she had felt each time she came to the shop had completely disappeared.

In the end, Yoshimi could only guess at what sort of ceremony had happened. The boy's explanation was not to the point, and he just kept on saying not to worry.

– Just as I thought, Natori probably told me to bring my grandmother's diary to chase me out.

When the boy handed the dream catcher back to her and she put it around her neck, she was

oddly startled.

'Eh?'

When she said that quietly, the boy looked at her dubiously.

'Is something the matter?'

'I just felt it was a bit heavy.'

'Ah...'

'I wonder what Natori-san used this for.'

'That, um... That charm has the power to suck things in, right?'

'As expected, you know a lot. This is called a dream catcher. It's a charm Native Americans used to catch bad dreams.'

'To catch bad dreams...'

The boy looked like he was mulling over something.

'Maybe, rather than just bad dreams, good dreams get caught too?'

'Eh?'

'Ah, no, I just thought that'd be nice. Maybe that was why it felt heavier.'

'It got heavier because of good dreams, huh... That's a wonderful thought. But whose dreams?'

'Heh... The antiques', definitely.'

The boy smiled, looking a bit embarrassed.

'Ah, also, about that go board and those go stones, Natori-san said that you should keep them if possible.'

'Yes, they're mementos of my grandmother's memories.'

'And your grandmother got it from her grandfather.'

'Eh? Really?'

'Ah, um, I feel like somebody said that.'

This time, the boy smiled like he was trying to cover something up.

Yoshimi left the shop together with the boy and his pet cat. She locked the door and left Lamp Hall. While walking with the boy to the station, Yoshimi wondered about what this meeting was in the end.

She probably would not meet with Natori or this boy again. Yoshimi felt that way.

However, meeting with those two had come from some mysterious connection, and she felt that it had a very important meaning for her life.

'So Yoshimi, you have to strain your ears for connections between people like that too. Even if it's somebody you'll only meet once in your whole life, that person might be somebody you have a mysterious connection to.'

Suddenly, her grandmother's voice echoed in her ears.

– Eh? When did I hear this?

-

'Thank you very much. The truth was, I was troubled over what to do before coming here. I'm glad I came.'

When they parted, the boy Taki Tooru said this while looking straight at Yoshimi with a carefree expression.

'Same here. Please tell Natori-san thank you for me.'

Yoshimi muttered this quietly at the boy's figure as he disappeared through the gates.

'Also, tell him he's an idiot.'

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9

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'His dream came true.'

Taki said that to me and Sensei as we walked.

'Eh?'

'I'm talking about my grandfather.'

The day after I returned from Lamp Hall, I had already explained the circumstances to Taki. That said, I left out a lot of the details. I had kept the mojibake in my eyes a secret from Taki in the first place, and I also hid the fact that the exorcist was the actor Natori Shuuichi.

I ended up saying that when I went to Lamp Hall, I coincidentally witnessed the exorcism, and Yoshimi-san told me a lot of things. The puzzle of the letter a game of go. Though there were a lot of youkai in Lamp Hall, since the exorcist was skilful, all of them were sealed into the go stones. Well, the story was about right.

This was the conversation from a few days afterwards. Taki had received a letter of gratitude from Yoshimi-san, and she caught me and sensei when we were heading home from Nanatsujiya.

'My grandfather looked for youkai his whole life and he couldn't see those youkai with his eyes, but the truth was that he was playing go with youkai.'

'Ah, that's true.'

'Isn't it a stupid story for the person himself not to have realised?' said Sensei.

'That's not true, Sensei. I'm sure...'

Even if he hadn't noticed, something had definitely been conveyed. That was why Shinichirou-san, the youkai and Ichiko-san too had enjoyed it so much.

'That's true. I wish I could have gone to that shop too.'

'Eh?'

'I mean, he was my grandfather. I wanted to see it with my own eyes... Hehe, but I'm thankful to you and Nyanko-sensei, Natsume-kun.'

Then, Taki muttered this.

'To Grandfather, Ichiko-san was... a very important friend, it seems.'

'Eh?'

When I went to Lamp Hall, Taki had searched through the storehouse at her home and found a bundle of letters. They were stored carefully along with what were probably the documents bought at Lamp Hall.

'They were wrapped in beautiful cloth at the back of the box... Like he was carefully wrapping up his important memories.'

Taki smiled kindly while thinking about it.

'Ah, yes, Yoshimi-san's letter was a bit strange.'

'Eh? What was?'

I was surprised when Taki changed the subject so suddenly.

'She called me Tooru-kun, you know? What do you think?'

'Ah, that's, er...'

Taki stared at me.

'She's talking about you, isn't she, Natsume-kun.'

'W-well... yes.'

Then, Taki made me explain in detail why I ended up being called Taki. Well, I said that it was because the mischief-loving exorcist had overdone it. Since it was true.

'Well, it's fine. I'll think of it as you going for me.'

After saying that, Taki forgave me in the end.

'Something wonderful was written in Yoshimi-san's letter.'

'Eh?'

'The meeting between me and Tooru-kun – that is, Natsume-kun.'

'Yes.'

'The meeting between me and Tooru-kun was definitely a wonderful connection born from a series of coincidences and fates. That's what I think now, it said.'

'A series of coincidences and fates, huh.'

'Then, I thought too.'

'What about?'

'Calling out to you, Natsume-kun, and your replying to me – those were definitely just coincidences, right?'

'Yes.'

'If I had spoken to somebody else, and that person replied... I feel terrified when I think about it.'

'Ah, that's true.'

If that had happened, something very unlucky would have happened for both Taki and that somebody else.

'But when I read Yoshimi-san's letter, I felt a bit relieved.'

'Why?'

'That definitely wasn't just coincidence. I think some power of fate made that happen.'

'Power of fate, huh.'

'The reason I accidentally called out your name that time was because I knew you as a mysterious person from before then, Natsume-kun.'

'Really?'

'Seeds of fate like that spread and some of them overlap like connected coincidences... I can't express myself well though.'

I could mostly understand what she was trying to say.

'Because of that, I was saved, and because we met, now I get along well with the kitty, Tanuma-kun and everyone.'

Taki spoke while walking a little ahead of me.

'That's why, even if it was a coincidence that I called out to you back then – '

Taki turned to face me.

'I just thought it was a wonderful coincidence.'

After saying that, she held up her thumb and winked awkwardly.

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Notes:

The kirin (麒麟) or qilin is the most powerful creature in Japanese mythology (though this isn't the case in Chinese mythology) and is the namesake of Kirin beer. For an example of a Japanese kirin, look up their logo.

Though translated as auspicious beast below, the specific word (in case you're interested (四灵兽)) used is zuijuu (四灵兽), which are represented by the four benevolent animals: the qilin, the dragon, the tortoise and the fenghuang (or Ho-o, if you will (oohoo)). These four were the greatest of all animals and were considered good omens.

Fuseki (碁序) is a go term which describes how the board opens and usually occurs at the beginning of a game. It uses the kanji for to take position (碁) and stone (碁).

Moku (目) is the go term for point of territory. (Incidentally, Japan uses territory scoring rather than area scoring which is common in China.)

Komi (碁差) is the compensation given to the player playing white since black has the advantage of going first. In Japan, the komi was set at 6.5 moku by the Japan Go Institute in September 2002. However, at the time of the game in this novel, it was only 5.5 moku.

Tengen (碁中央) is the centre point on the go board.

Nobi (碁伸び) is a go move wherein one plays directly next to one's own stone to create a line. Though in the novel the term is written in katakana, the kanji for nobi (碁伸び) means to extend.

Hane (碁跳) is a go move wherein one plays a stone so it reaches around the opponent's. The novel uses the katakana but the kanji for hane (碁跳) means to leap.

Uttegaeshi (碁逆) is a go move where one plays a stone to be captured so that one has a larger capture afterwards. Though written in katakana in the novel, the kanji for uttegaeshi (碁逆) means move reversal.

Seiza (碁座), which uses the kanji for proper and to sit, is a traditional Japanese way of sitting - the one used during tea ceremonies &c.

Dame (碁場) is a go term indicating a neutral point. It's written with katakana in the novel but the kanji for dame (碁場) also has the meaning of 'no good'.

The Ayakashi's Tune¹

It was still before the monsoon season, just after the change from winter to summer uniforms, when I noticed that Natsume-kun was in the same school as I was. It happened after school, when we were on our way to the music room for club activities; Miki had said she'd left something behind, and gone to get it. I was waiting right in the centre of the corridor. As I was absent-mindedly looking out of the window, I noticed that just up ahead, someone else was staring outside in the same manner. A handsome face.² A boy with a clear gaze. He was staring at the school's backyard, where there were nothing but some small flower beds. Staring at those flower beds, where there was no one, that person suddenly said, quietly: "Ah, that's dangerous."

He'd got my attention; I too looked over to the flower beds, but there really was no one there. When I looked at him again, he had a relieved expression, and his gaze moved as though watching something depart. Meanwhile, other boys emerged from Class 2's classroom, and called his name -- "Natsume, let's go."

"Eh? Natsume... -kun?"

"Sorry for making you wait, Miyako... hm? What is it?"

Without even replying to Miki, I watched in mute surprise as he headed towards the exit with his friends.

--Club activities that day were awful.

"Shinohara, you got it wrong again. Do it over."

I was scolded countless times by our teacher-in-charge, and I remember the dumbfounded faces of my upperclassmen.

As my aunt was a musician, and I'd played the clarinet since I was a child, it was natural that I'd join the wind instrument club upon entering high school. Miki, who was in Class 5 with me, played the trumpet. She was cheerful and outgoing, and it was thanks in large part to her that I -- shy as I was -- had managed to fit in with the class.

"Hey, Miyako, what's wrong? You're so distracted today."

Even Miki was pointing it out. That day, my head was full of a certain recollection that had been sleeping in the very depths of my memory.

It was about Natsume Takashi.

It was back when we were still in the lower grades of elementary school. For just a brief period of barely two months, he was in the same class as I was. The town I still live in is quite a distance from this high school. He'd transferred to the local elementary school there. He'd lost both parents, was being shuffled from one relative to another -- that's what I'd heard. At first, because of the novelty of it all, everyone spoke to him; but after a certain incident, Natsume-kun was branded a liar, and

gradually no one wanted to interact with him anymore. To me, that incident was a source of trauma.

It happened during music class. We were all playing a children's song we'd just learnt on the recorder.

--So, mi-fa-so, la, so, mi-fa-so, do, la-so-mi-do-re

The kids around me, who'd just begun learning, were playing with all their might along with our teacher's chant. But they kept getting it wrong. I'd long since been learning from my aunt, so their mistakes bothered me.

"Ah, Yamamoto-kun is a semi-tone lower... Saki-chan's tempo is slow--"

Suddenly, at that moment, a beautiful tune from a flute reached my ears: completely different from the main melody, yet in perfect harmony.

--Piihyurururu, ruroron³

"Eh?"

When I was looking around, trying to find the person who was playing the flute, *it* happened.

"Uwaaa!"

With a cry, one of the kids bolted up from his chair.

"What's wrong, Natsume-kun?"

"A strange guy over there-- he looks like a tengu, he's playing a flute..."

"Eh? Tengu?"

"Ah, look, he's escaping that way," Natsume-kun said, pointing at the window. Surprised, the teacher said: "What? I can't see it, though. Can anyone here see it?"

That question surely wasn't ill-intentioned. The teacher thought Natsume-kun might really have seen something, and just wanted to check. But the end result was to make him an outcast.

"Anyone who saw something, raise your hand."

I didn't know what to do. I hadn't seen anything. But I'd certainly heard it. Something had definitely been there. The only person who knew that, apart from Natsume-kun, was me. But... I didn't raise my hand. In the end, Natsume-kun said "Sorry... I must have been mistaken," and sat back down.

From then on, he began to be known as someone who occasionally said strange things, and everyone started to avoid him. Actually, even after that, Natsume-kun would insist that he could see something weird, and suddenly shove someone away and flee -- that sort of thing. So in any

case, the result would have been the same. Still, if I'd only raised my hand back then... it might have been that the gazes which fell upon Natsume-kun would not have been this cold. He might have had at least one friend who believed him. Natsume-kun was all alone in class, and no one spoke to him; neither did I. I was afraid of being told it was all my fault, and so I stayed away from him.

In the end, without having made any friends, he moved away to stay with other relatives in another town.

It seems that I felt relieved, and sealed away my memories of him. I'd just received a clarinet from my aunt, and I put my heart into practising my playing. Throughout elementary school, and even after entering middle school, I would play my clarinet on the way to school. On the way home, and only when I managed to play so well that I surprised even myself, I would hear that tune again:

--Pihiyurururu, ruroron

It was probably a cross-blown flute⁴. This is what's called the 'Japanese scale'⁵, isn't it? From the depths of the forest, or perhaps from halfway up the mountain, faint yet distinctly in harmony with my clarinet, the beautiful melody was carried towards me on the wind.

Looking back, it's a mystery why I didn't recall Natsume-kun at those times. But I thought of that flute melody -- one which only I could hear -- as a splendid present from the gods. Only when I managed to play well would the gods of music be kind enough to play the flute along with me.

Even after entering high school, I continued to play music as if it were the obvious thing to do. From entering school till now, my everyday life would go something like this:

Go to school.

Attend lessons.

Practise in the clubroom.

Go home-- and the cycle would repeat. Since I was that sort of person, even though I'd heard that there was a transfer student in Class 2, there was no reason for me to have realised that that was Natsume-kun.

But was it really *that* Natsume-kun?

It could be someone else with the same name.

Once I got home, I got out the class namelist and checked.

--Natsume Takashi.

Yep. *Badump, badump, badump*.⁶ The sound of my heart quickening rang in my ears -- I was that shaken.

"Hey, Miki, what sort of person is the transfer student in Class 2?"

I tried asking the next day, in school.

"Eh? You're asking now? You're slow when it comes to gossip, as usual, Miyako. When he first got here, the girls in our class went to spy on him and said he was pretty handsome -- they made a big fuss over it. Apparently, he looks aloof, but if you talk to him, he's surprisingly friendly and seems like the kind of person who'd be kind to anyone."

Suddenly, a feeling of guilt resurfaced. Natsume's personality, as Miki had described it, was surely unchanged from elementary school; it must have been his true nature. And I was the one who'd made him isolated in that class.

From then on, my clarinet-playing began to sound muddy and dull, and I did not hear the tune of the gods.

The long monsoon passed, and summer came.

Our wind instrument club was going to hold a summer training camp to ready ourselves for the autumn championships, and we were busy with preparations for that. We'd somehow decided that the training camp would be held at some facilities near my hometown: a public guesthouse a little way into the mountains. Before the camp, the club president and I decided to check the place out. On the Sunday before the summer holidays, when I was in the mountains with the club president, I saw a figure moving through the overgrown forest. Disappearing swiftly into the far side of the thicket, with what looked like a round, fat cat on his shoulders, was -- unmistakably -- Natsume-kun.

Translator's notes:

¹*Ayakashi no ne*. *Ne* can mean just 'sound', or in music, 'tone'; I've gone with 'tune' to keep the musical connotation.

²Literally, "a handsome face with a high-bridged nose", which is considered attractive in Japan.

³I don't know how flute tunes are conveyed in English, so I'm just going to transliterate this. x_x

⁴You know, the sort of flute that's held horizontally when played.

⁵ㄱ ㄴ ㄷ , *waonkai*. From what I've found, it seems to be a sort of musical scale that was used in traditional Japanese music??

⁶Or in the original Japanese: *doku, doku, doku* (not *doki*).

"I have come to see Natsume-dono of the Book of Friends."

"Uwaa, Nyanko-sensei! There's someone strange outside the window again--"

"Calm down, Natsume. If he looks like trouble, I'll drive him away."

Ever since I was a child, I've occasionally seen strange things. Those things, which no one else seems able to see, are probably something like what you'd call youkai.

"Natsume-dono, I came with a request."

"Do you want your name back?"

"No, my name is not in there. I have merely heard that the name of an ayakashi for whom I am searching is in that booklet."

"Searching?"

"Indeed. Natsume-dono. Please, help me summon Ashi-no-Takumi¹ using that Book of Friends."

"Ashi-no-Takumi, you said?"

The ayakashi had the appearance of a tengu, and was holding a small cross-flute in his hand.

"I am known as Hichiri."

"Hichiri... haven't we met before, somewhere?"

"Hm? It was only very recently that I learnt of Natsume-dono of the Book of Friends, through rumours. To have met before that... hmm?"

Hichiri stopped speaking, and fixed his gaze upon my face.

"Come to think of it, that face... no, it cannot be. And yet, it's similar--"

"Is there something wrong with my face?"

"No, it must surely be a coincidental resemblance. More importantly, Natsume-dono, about Ashi-no-Takumi--"

"Hang on, please. This Ashi-no-Takumi, exactly who--"

"I've heard about him. Some flute-making artisan, that sort of thing," said Nyanko-sensei.

"Indeed. When it comes to making flutes, Ashi-no-Takumi was the best of his time, a master craftsman. I am, as you can see, a player of the flute, but this flute's condition has been strange of late. Not only am I unable to achieve the desired sound, the timbre is dull."

"So you'd like Ashi-no-Takumi to make a new flute for you?"

"No, I am quite attached to this flute; I wish for it to be repaired. I thus began searching for Ashi-no-Takumi, but ever since his name was taken by Natsume of the Book of Friends, it seems he has shut himself away in the mountains and will not meet with anyone--"

"And so you'd like me to summon him. But since I don't know what that ayakashi looks like, I can't summon him."

"What!"

Hichiri was at a loss for words.

"The one who defeated him in a contest and took his name was my grandmother. I can't summon an ayakashi whom I've never seen before, and I can't return their name either."

"Oi, Hichiri or whoever you are. If you're a flute virtuoso, try playing a tune. I'll listen," Nyanko-sensei said, while eating a stick of dango.

"Certainly. It would be vexing to simply leave like this. Listen, then."

Hichiri readied the cross-flute, and -- taking a breath -- began to play. He had superb skill. I couldn't hear a dull timbre at all. Perhaps it was the sort of subtle difference which only those known as masters could discern. A beautiful tone, a youkai which looked like a tengu... suddenly, a memory from the past resurfaced in my mind.

"Ah! You were from that time--"

It was a music lesson in elementary school. As we were playing in unison, I'd unexpectedly heard the sound of another sort of flute. Yes, it was certainly this sound. When I'd looked, a tengu with a flute was beside our teacher. Without thinking, I'd cried out...

"What, were you that whelp from back then? You've grown."

"Whoa, feels like you're suddenly looking down on me. That's not very nice."

"Hmph, I have no reason to bow my head to someone who cannot even summon Ashi-no-Takumi."

"But if Natsume -- who has the Book of Friends
-- went there, that guy might appear in order to get his name back."

"Hmph... ...Natsume-sama! I beg of you, assist me!"

"What a fickle character. Oi, Natsume, you've no obligation to help this sort of guy."

"That's true. And I had a rough time of it in the past, thanks to you."

"You can't mean that! Natsume-dono, please consider my plea~"

No matter how I'm begged, I have my life at school and with the Fujiwaras; I can't simply leave. I flatly refused... or rather, I should have done so.

The next Sunday, Nyanko-sensei and I -- along with Hichiri -- were in the mountains where he'd guessed Ashi-no-Takumi would be. I thought of it as a losing proposition. But when someone who's burdened with a particular thought implores me desperately, I can't refuse.

It was halfway up a mountain, close to a town where I'd stayed for two months or so when I was in elementary school.

"O~i, Ashi-no-Takumi~, are you here?"

I half-heartedly tried calling out, but there was no reply.

"Meh, there's no reason it would be so easy to find him. Natsume, let's eat dango or something and go."

"Surely not! We have but just arrived!"

While we headed into the depths of the forest, I glimpsed two girls -- wearing the uniform from my school -- walking from the bus stop along the track that led up to the guesthouse.

"Oh no-- did they see me?"

Still, surely I could just make something up if they had seen me. With that thought, we went even deeper into the forest.

We must have searched for two or three hours. The sun was beginning to set, and it was about time to give up on that day's search and go home.

"Milord, milord, are you searching for Ashi-no-Takumi?"

With those words, there appeared before us an ayakashi with the face of a beast -- not quite that of a cow, nor a hound.

"My lords, did you not know? They say there is a melody which summons Ashi-no-Takumi."

"A melody which summons him?"

"Yes, if you play that melody upon a flute, Ashi-no-Takumi will be summoned -- or so they say. It's a tune called 'Niji no Hakaze'². It goes something like this. Piihyururu--"

"Ah, could it be--" And saying that, Hichiri played his flute. It was the tune he'd played in my room.

It was a splendid performance. After playing the melody, Hichiri quietly put the flute away. We waited. But nothing appeared.

"Was that the one?"

The cow-hound answered. "It was certainly that tune. I've seen Ashi-no-Takumi play it before, after all."

"What did you say?"

"Takumi let a human girl hear that tune, and said that to summon him, she could just play it."

"A human girl..."

"He said he slept in a marsh overgrown with weeds, a bit further ahead, so he might not hear if he was simply called. But if he could hear that tune played all the way till the end, he'd surely awaken -- so he said. It was then that the human girl named the tune. "How about 'Niji no Hakaze?'" -- just like that."

I knew instantly who that had been. Strangely, Hichiri too seemed to have realised something.

"Well, it's an old story. Takumi's probably forgotten it. Right, I'll be off now."

With that, the cow-hound dashed off through the thicket.

"This flute is spoilt, and the sound it makes is dull -- there's no way it can summon him. But this is the only flute I have."

"How is it that you know that tune, Hichiri?"

"That tune was taught directly to me by my master³. My master was a very strict person, and would strike out with a fist, unforgivingly, if I made a mistake."

As he said that, Hichiri looked nostalgic.

"In that case, that master might have had other disciples."

"No, I don't believe there were any other disciples besides myself. If you ask why, it's because my master..."

But Hichiri would say no more about his master.

"Well then, nothing for it but to give up. Natsume, let's go," Nyanko-sensei said, hurrying me. Whereupon Hichiri, looking as though he didn't want to say it, confided in us.

"They weren't my master's disciple, but there is someone else -- just one person -- who can play it. But the thing is..."

According to what we coaxed out of the hemming and hawing Hichiri, that person was a human girl. She lived at the foot of this mountain, and on the way home from school, she would play the flute as she walked, every day. Liking that cheerful tone, Hichiri would play his flute in accompaniment, and that girl seemed able to hear the sound which should have been audible only to ayakashi. And then Hichiri -- as his master did before -- would play for her that tune he learnt from his master, though only in brief snatches. And then that girl would, with seeming enjoyment, continue playing after he had done so.

"Ah, how she seemed to enjoy playing a tune! Humans are fascinating creatures. Though there are those who are only able to lead a life of deceiving and outwitting others, there are also those who spend their days so purely and simply enjoying music. As long as those such as that child exist, I cannot come to hate humans. I most definitely cannot hate them."

There was an incredibly tender expression on Hichiri's face as he said that.

"Hang on. If you played that tune for this human child, shouldn't Ashi-no-Takumi have appeared then?"

"Both my master and I only passed on this tune in snippets. So that must be why, at that time, Ashi-no-Takumi did not awaken."

"I see. Then if we somehow just ask her to play the tune from start to finish..."

"That's impossible," Hichiri muttered. "Recently, for whatever reason, that child's flute has also sounded dull. It no longer plays with the delightful tone which it used to. Her flute must also be broken, surely. No... perhaps it's my fault."

"Eh?"

"Because my flute was broken, her flute also... So, no matter what, I must repair this flute."

"Hichiri, could it be that--"

"You've fallen for her, eh?"

"D-don't utter such nonsense. I just want that child to play with that delightful tone once more, that's all..."

Translator's notes:

¹ 葎 師 . Literally, 'Master craftsman of the reeds'.

² 虹 葉 風 . 'The leaf-stirring wind of the rainbow', or less literally, something like 'The rainbow's breeze'. 'Hakaze' refers specifically to a wind which stirs the leaves.

³ In the sense of a respected teacher.

In the guesthouse, while we were making arrangements with the person in charge, I heard that tune.

"Ah!"

"What's wrong, Shinohara?" Surprised, the club president looked at me.

"Sorry, it was nothing."

Why? That melody of the gods¹, which I hadn't heard for ages -- why was I hearing it now?

After we had finished making the arrangements and were heading back down the mountain, the club president said worriedly: "Shinohara, is there something you're worried about?"

"Eh?"

"You know, I like how you play the clarinet. I thought you were great despite being a newcomer -- I admired that. But recently, it's kind of..."

"Eh?"

"I thought you were in a bit of a slump or something. Maybe other people might not notice even if they listened, but I could hear that compared to before, it kind of lacked energy..."

So, this person had noticed.

"President... thank you. But I'm okay. I'll figure it out before the competition."

With that, the day ended with us going home.

Afternoon break, the next day. I went to the music room alone. It wasn't that I had any particular business there. Maybe it was just that I couldn't put up with the clamour of the classroom. What I'd seen on the mountain path on the way to the guesthouse -- had that really been Natsume-kun? That melody of the gods, which I'd heard then -- did that have something to do with Natsume-kun? As I thought about such things, I climbed the dimly-lit staircase, turned down the corridor towards the end. When I opened the door on which 'Music Room' was written, someone was already there.

"Ah... sorry, are you using this place?"

He was standing before the piano, and seemed as though he'd just been about to play something.

"No." Please don't notice the sound of my beating heart. "Um... what are you doing here?"

"There was something I wanted to check out."

"What was it?"

"No, it's okay. I'll be leaving now."

He made to leave.

"Wait!"

"Eh?"

"I'll help."

"Ehh?"

"If you're trying to check something out, I'll help you out." What was I saying? "I'm in the wind instrument club, you see. So, well, if it's something to do with music, I could help, probably."

"I see." Natsume-kun looked at me with that clear gaze, and said, "Thank you."

"There's a tune I want to transcribe. It's one which I heard someone play on the flute. It was a really good tune, but circumstances meant that that person couldn't play it anymore, so I thought that if I transcribed it, maybe I could get someone else to play it."

"What kind of tune?"

"Well... I can't play it very well..."

Saying that, he hit the piano keys with a finger.

"Did it start like this? No, was it this one?"

As though he was confirming the notes with someone beside him, he hit the keys falteringly. When I'd listened halfway, I understood what tune it was.

"That's fine, I've got it."

I stood next to Natsume-kun, and played it on his behalf. That tune, which I'd always heard on the way home from school.

"Ah, that's it!" Natsume cried out in surprise. "But why... eh? She knows it?"

It seemed as though he'd asked someone who was there -- but couldn't be seen -- about me.

"I see, so that's why... but that's a surprise."

"Is someone there?"

"N-no, just talking to myself. Um... what's your name?"

"I'm Shinohara Miyako, from Class 5."

"I'm Natsume. Natsume Takashi from Class 2. Eh? Shinohara-san, have we met before?"

Now was the time to say it. 'Sorry.' Because I didn't raise my hand back then, you... Yet the words that instantly came out were, "No. I don't think so."

"Ah, is that so. Shinohara-san, um, there's a big favour I'd like to ask of you..."

As he said that, the chime rang, signalling the start of afternoon classes.

"Ah, it's time."

As though tearing myself away from him, I ran out of the music room. It's more accurate to say that I escaped.

"Hey, Miyako, what happened? You've gotten so many bits wrong again," said Miki, who was in the same room as me for the training camp.

"She probably hurt her finger or something, right? I mean, it's rare for Miyako to make so many

mistakes."

While I tried my best not to meet him in the corridors at school or in the schoolyard, the days passed in that state of evasion, and in the blink of an eye, it was finally summer vacation. As planned, we'd come to the guesthouse near where I lived, for the training camp. Because of the shock of meeting Natsume-kun in the music room before the summer vacation, I had fallen even deeper into a slump.

"Hmm? What's up with that sheet music?"

"Ah, that's--"

Miki, who'd simply gone ahead and opened my bag, pulled out a single page of sheet music from inside. When I'd reached home after that meeting, I'd spent the rest of the day transcribing the tune. 'When I hand this over to him, this time, I'll be sure to apologise for what happened in the past.' Although I wrote it out with that in mind, when it came down to it, I didn't have the courage.

"This is, well, the tune of the gods."

"The tune of the gods?"

"The gods of music² taught it to me."

"Miyako, you're a real romantic, aren't you? When you say it, I almost end up believing there really are these 'gods of music.'"

They really do exist, Miki. But they don't visit me any longer.

Exhausted from the first day of the training camp, we decided to go straight to sleep that day. On that night--

"Natsume-dono. Will you not be kind enough to play this flute, on my behalf?"

"Eh? Me?"

Hichiri had suddenly said it as we were heading down the mountain.

"No, I can't do it. But since I know the tune, if I transcribe it, then maybe we can get someone else to play it."

"Please do, I beg you."

And that was why, during afternoon break the next day, Hichiri and I headed to the music room to use the school's piano and try transcribing 'Niji no Hakaze'. At that point, she arrived.

The moment Hichiri saw her face, he stiffened and froze. I tried to leave, but she called out to me to stop, and said she'd help with the transcribing. The melody which I played falteringly, while

confirming each note with Hichiri -- she understood it there and then, and played it in my place.

"But why..."

"Natsume-dono. She knows it. This tune."

"Eh? She knows it?"

"It's that child. The one I mentioned, the girl who plays the flute with such enjoyment each day."

"I see, so that's why... but that's a surprise."

I wanted to ask a favour of her, to play that tune on that mountain, but just then the chime rang and the chance was lost.

"That is enough, Natsume-dono. The way her flute is now, it will -- as mine was -- be unable to summon Ashi-no-Takumi."

After that, Hichiri said he'd try to do something on his own, and went off somewhere. I could do nothing but watch as he left. A few days passed in the blink of an eye, and it was the summer vacation. One night, Hichiri came again.

"I apologise, Natsume-dono. Would you not accompany me tonight, just one more time?"

It was the full moon. Hichiri, who'd heard that Ashi-no-Takumi liked moonlight, had thought: "If it's tonight, perhaps..."

"Perhaps even the muddy sound of my flute might be turned into a clear melody by the moonlight. And if so, then surely--"

After the Fujiwaras³ were fast asleep, Nyanko-sensei and I snuck stealthily out of the room, and decided to meet up with Hichiri.

We arrived at the swamp, overgrown with reeds, where Ashi-no-Takumi was said to be sleeping. While waiting for the full moon to rise till it was right overhead, Hichiri and I talked a little.

"The human girl to whom Ashi-no-Takumi taught this 'Niji no Hakaze' melody -- she was probably my master."

"Eh?"

"I say 'master', but she wasn't a real master, she'd just high-handedly made me call her that. When I was playing the flute one day, a human girl appeared before me, saying "Can you play this tune?" and whistling it clumsily for me to hear. As I prided myself upon being able to play any sort of tune skillfully, I immediately imitated her and played it, but my master said it was wrong. From then on, for days, she made me accompany her, saying it was a crash course. When I had managed to memorise it down to the last phrase, she didn't make me play it all the way through, but just left, suddenly and sulkily."

It was needless to say who that was.

"As usual, she was a fickle girl, that Reiko," Nyanko-sensei muttered.

One wonders what Reiko had intended, when she taught Hichiri the tune which she'd heard from Ashi-no-Takumi.

"Natsume-dono. There is one more thing I would like you to listen to."

"Eh?"

"I have yet to apologise. For that incident back then."

Translator's notes:

¹I should note, rather belatedly, that the original Japanese (神々々々々 , and elsewhere, 神々々々) is ambiguous as to whether the gods are singular or plural, i.e. whether it should be "God's melody" or "the melody of the gods".

²Again, it's not clear if this (神々々々々) should be singular or plural.

³He says 'Touko-san-tachi', 'Touko-san and the others', but that's awkward when only referring to her and Shigeru, so...

In the training camp that night, I had a mysterious dream.

--It was a swamp somewhere, overgrown with reeds. The full moon was floating in the sky. On the

footpath, a figure. It was Natsume-kun. Beside him, someone else, indistinct, such that I didn't know what they looked like; only that they held a cross-flute in their hand. For whatever reason, that was the only thing I knew distinctly.

I heard their conversation.

"I'm sorry about that time, Natsume-dono."

"What are you talking about?"

"It was back when you were still young. Enticed by the cheerful music, I ended up entering that building called a 'school'. There, human children were playing the recorder with all their might. I found that sight unbearably amusing, but they were trying so hard that in the end, I couldn't bear it any longer, and played along with them on my own flute."

--Ah, he's talking about that time.

"I'd never have thought that there would be someone who could see my form. It seems that I caused you trouble."

--I have to apologise, too.

"I apologise."

--I'm sorry, Natsume-kun.

For a while, Natsume-kun looked at the other person in silence. I held my breath and waited for him to speak.

"In the past, I might have gotten angry, like -- "Don't say that now, when it's too late." But now, I'll say 'thank you'."

--Eh?

"For sparing a thought for me, back then."

This is who Natsume-kun is. I'd only been thinking about myself. If I apologise now, it would just be to satisfy myself. How the person receiving the apology would feel -- that hadn't crossed my mind. But he was the sort of person who could take all that into account and accept the feelings of the person who was apologising, and say thank you--

Right then, I awoke with a gasp. In the next bed, Miki was sleeping peacefully, her breathing calm. Straining my ears, I could hear, faintly -- from somewhere far away -- that melody. I leapt out of bed, and flew out of the room with clarinet and score in hand.

Sneaking quietly out of the camp quarters, over which a hush had fallen, I ran along the forest trail.

A brief distance away, I strained my ears once more. I could still hear that melody. But it was somehow different from the god's melody which I'd always heard, a performance full of insecurity that was mixed with regret and hesitation. In that sound's muddiness, I sensed familiarity. That was only to be expected.

--That was my regret and hesitation.

The feeling of guilt that had resurfaced when I met Natsume-kun again. That had spread from my flute to the god's flute¹. In that case, I was the only one who could tune it correctly. With my clarinet at my lips, I played with all my heart. For a moment, the sound of the god's flute wavered. I noticed. The god had immediately begun to play in harmony with me. I, too, was getting close to the god's performance. As though shaking the moon in heaven and the trees on earth, the sound of the cross-flute and the sound of the clarinet resonated. We were trying to become one. The regrets of the past, or the hesitation of today-- don't seal those away at the bottom of your heart, but spit all of that out, here and now. And then, beginning afresh, face him. Natsume-kun. With a sense of gratitude.

--Our ensemble became one.

The tuning of our hearts, the god's and mine, was complete.

I lifted the flute from my lips for a moment, then began to play again, from the beginning. An exquisite melody shook the trees of the forest. In the instant that the tune was finished, as though released by a demon that had possessed me, I collapsed right there.

It was a performance that shook the heart.

Once Hichiri finished playing 'Niji no Hakaze' -- in harmony with the melody of a clarinet, coming from somewhere unknown -- the trees and animals and insects all fell silent, as though soaking in the lingering echoes. Before long, a section of the overgrown reeds rustled, and a youkai who looked like a workman with his sleeves tied back² appeared.

"What's this? You're not Reiko. Exactly who--?"

"I'm Reiko-san's grandson. Ashi-no-Takumi, I came to return your name. Please receive it."

He gazed at me for a while, but eventually nodded as if he'd accepted everything. I drew forth the Book of Friends, and cried:

"Ye who protect me, reveal that name!"

The Book of Friends revealed the page upon which the name was written. I tore it out, held it between my teeth. In that instant, the exchange between Ashi-no-Takumi and Reiko surfaced in my mind.

*

"Well, I've lost, I've lost. We'll take it that I've lost, so please stop."

"Really? Then it's my victory, yeah? Write your name here."

"I've never heard such poor flute-playing. If I hear any more, I may lose my mind. So we'll take it that I've lost."

"How rude! But it's my victory, anyway."

"Yes, I don't mind. But how troublesome. After this, I have to sleep in a swamp a little further up from here. Even if I'm summoned, I might not notice."

"I see, then let's decide on a tune for summoning you. If I play it, you definitely have to awaken, okay?"

*

"Ashi-no-Takumi, I return your name. Take it."

The characters of his name swirled and flowed into Ashi-no-Takumi's forehead.

I told Takumi what the circumstances were, and introduced Hichiri.

"Hichiri, give Takumi the flute."

"No, Natsume-dono, although we did summon him especially, this is no longer..."

"What, I've been summoned already, what are you hesitating for?"

Ashi-no-Takumi seized the flute from the hands of a wavering Hichiri. He scrutinised that flute with the sharp eyes of a master craftsman, and finally said:

"A splendid flute. Nowhere is it damaged. It is rare that I can lay my eyes upon something of this calibre."

I can't quite recall how I managed to return to the site of the training camp that night. It seems that I'd managed to wake up, walked back along the forest path, returned to the room before anyone noticed, and fell asleep instantly. Had it all been a dream? Or, perhaps, an illusion to which the doubts in my heart had given rise? Either would have been fine.

"Miyako, what happened? You've got right out of your slump."

Miki looked at me in surprise. The president, too, gave me a thumbs-up and a wink.

After the group practice ended, as I was staring at the sky alone, a rainbow arced faintly across the

summer hills. I wonder if I can invite Natsume-kun to the autumn championships? If I can, I'll say it then. I murmured those words as I faced the sky:

"Thank you."

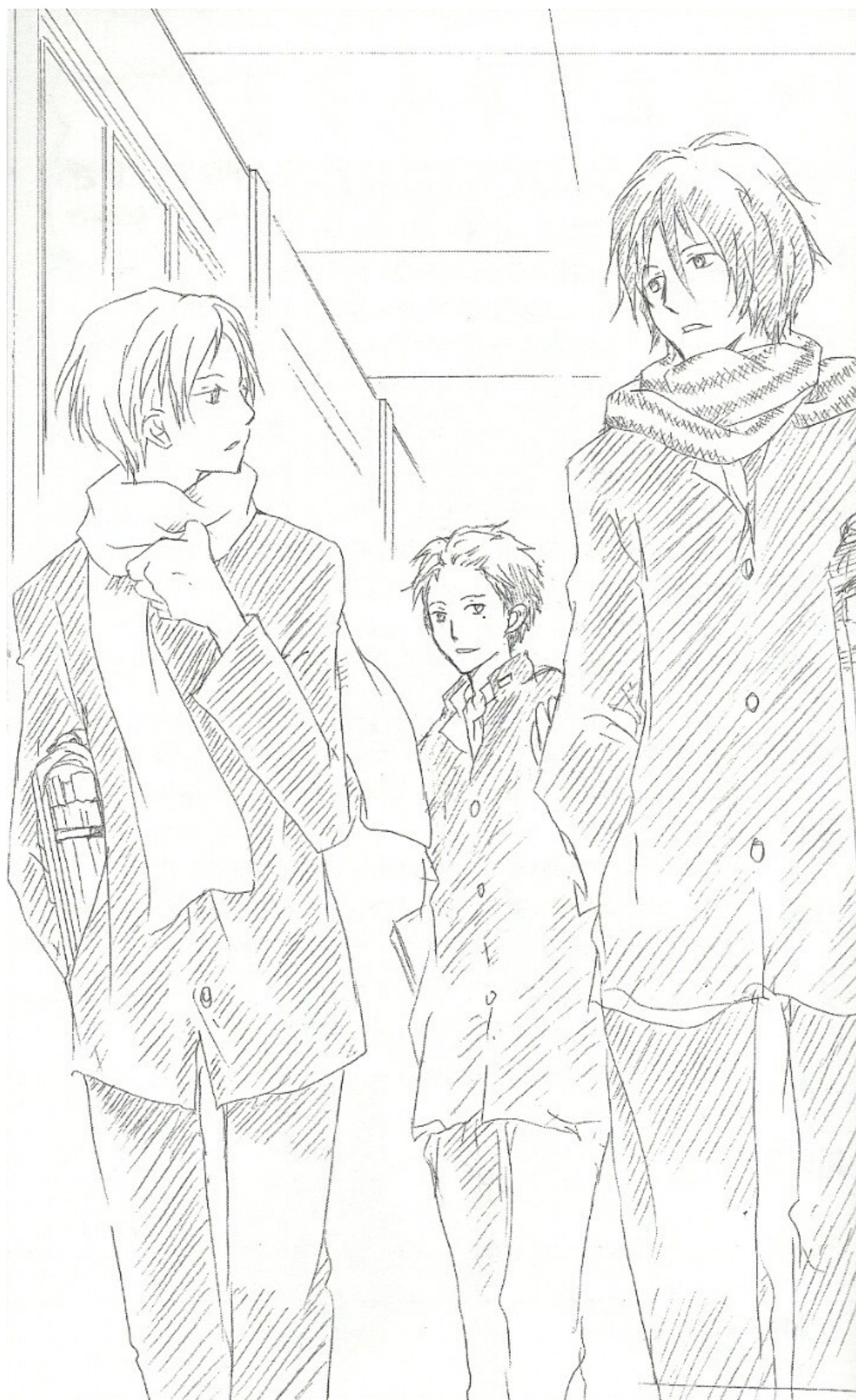
I'll be able to say it for real someday, surely. "I'm sorry about that time." And then: "Thank you." To Natsume-kun, and to my god of music.

Translator's notes:

¹At which point I realise that perhaps I should have used the singular 'god' throughout. Whoops. Sorry.

²Specifically, with a tasuki, like [this](#).







— Ah, this is a dream.

'... Kouta... Kouta.'

A voice was calling me.

'Kouta, I have to go...'

– Aki-nee? Where are you? You can't just leave your hospital room on your own again.

'Sorry, Kou-chan. I promised him that I would definitely go.'

– Wait. Who'd you make a promise with...

I looked for Aki-nee as I ran through the forest, which was like a dark maze. The trees were completely withered, and their cold, sharp branches – like icicles – blocked my path. Still, I pushed my way through them and ran towards the voice. While I was running, countless branches stabbed me, but it didn't hurt. Noticing that, I realised.

– Ah, this is a dream.

It was a lucid dream. That thing where someone opens their eyes in a dream. Even though their eyes are open, since they were still in a dream, it wasn't like they could do whatever they wanted. Strangely, even after I realised it was a dream, I still searched fervently for my sister, who was supposed to be in a hospital bed.

Finally, the thicket opened like a book to reveal a mysterious scene. There was a garden with a pond and a splendid mansion. Like Shinden-zukuri from the pages of a textbook, the mansion looked like one that the aristocracy used to live in. At some point, it had become night, and the moon was reflected in the pond.

– Eh? I feel like I've seen this place before.

On the opposite side of the pond, in the corridor that bound two buildings together, was Aki-nee.

– Aki-nee.

Just as I was about to rush over, I noticed that there was someone else at Aki-nee's side and stopped in my tracks.

I broke into a cold sweat. That was no good. I knew that intuitively.

With a backwards glance at me, frozen in place, that figure put an arm around Aki-nee's shoulder and took her into the building.

– Don't go!

I tried to yell, but no voice came out. At that moment, I heard a grating, ringing sound and opened my eyes.

The alarm clock set for six in the morning brought me back to reality.

– What an awful dream.

It wasn't an omen – while thinking that, I got out of bed, and I changed quickly and headed towards the kitchen in the corridor. I opened the refrigerator to look for something that could be breakfast, when my mother woke up as well.

'Kouta, are you going to the hospital today too?' she asked.

'Yeah, I'm going to check on nee-chan since she didn't look that great yesterday.'

'OK, then bring these persimmons for her. Akiko likes them, right? I don't think I'll be able to go since I have work until late again.'

'Got it.'

After eating the salad leftover from dinner that I found, I shoved a bag of three persimmons into my schoolbag and left home.

– Ugh, it's cold.

The neighbourhood was still covered in a white fog. I put the bag of persimmons in the basket on the bicycle and started pedalling. The cold morning air stung my face. I flew down the empty road on my bicycle, and when my body had finally warmed up, I reached the hospital.

-

Aki-nee – my sister Akiko had been hospitalised for several weeks already. My mother, who had raised my sister and me by herself, was busy with her work at the publishing company and couldn't come to the hospital often. Instead, I would pop in to visit my sister for a bit before and after school. Since the front entrance wasn't open yet, I went to the back and a guard I had gotten to know very well let me in. Then, I headed towards the hospital room, greeting the nurses whose night shifts had ended along the way.

I knocked and opened the door to see that Aki-nee was already awake and sitting up on her bed, vacantly looking out the window.

'Aki-nee.'

I spoke up, but there was no response.

'Mum told me to bring persimmons.'

I took the persimmons from the bag and put them on the side table. Then, Aki-nee slowly turned her face towards me, looking like she was still dreaming, and suddenly asked me something.

'Hey, Kouta... If I became a bride, what would you do?'

'Eh? A bride? Do you have someone to be the bride of, Aki-nee?'

Feeling startled as I remembered what happened in my dream, I asked a question back.

'Hehe, that's... still a secret.'

After saying that, Aki-nee vacantly looked out the window again.

Actually, this had continued for a few days already. In the morning, my sister would say something strange, but she would forget by noon and return to being her usual self. Yesterday, she asked me, 'Kouta, do you remember the promise at the hill in the back?' and couldn't answer me when I asked her back. When I went to visit her again in the evening and asked her, she said, 'Eh? I said something like that?' like she had no memory of it at all. I got more and more worried as this became more frequent, and I tried to visit her as often as possible in the morning.

(Aki-nee might be possessed by something strange.)

The truth was, absurd thoughts like that were going through my head. Things like youkai and evil spirits didn't exist in this world, but how Aki-nee had been these past few days had that sort of feeling.

-

'Well, it's time for me to go to school.'

I felt even more worried after today's conversation. I left behind my sister and the persimmons feeling depressed and went out of the hospital.

After pedalling my bicycle for a while, in the middle of a paddy field, there was one hill, which looked like an ancient tomb. This hill had a bit of a history, and I was told as a kid that I couldn't go there because there was a curse.

– Ah, could it be?

Maybe this was the hill in the back. Just as that went across my mind –

I thought that a sudden gust had blown by, when in front of my eyes, from the thicket on the hill, one person and some white and round thing came flying towards me.

'Uwaaa!'

He shouted as he fell to the ground. I quickly braked to stop the bicycle.

'You ungrateful little – ! Run off more quietly if you're going to run off!'

He had an unexpectedly shrill voice.

'Shush, sensei.'

Eh? The voice changed?

However, there was only one person in front of me. Did I just mishear?

The person who stood up, hugging that pig-like thing, had the same high school uniform as me.

– Ah, in class 2... there was a Natsume or something.

Natsume and I stood still for a while, looking at each other.

I wonder if he knows me. Since we're in different classes. Maybe it'd be better if I said hi. But what

should I say in a situation like this?

Maybe the same thoughts were running through both of our heads. Finally, Natsume let out a laugh with a forced smile and raised a hand. Silently, I raised a hand too and then got back on my bicycle to leave.

Ah, that was awkward.

Eh? It was pretty far from the school to here, but what was that guy doing? Maybe he runs.

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Because something like that happened in the morning, after I got to school, I suddenly thought of something, and during class and lunch break, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Natsume was the reason for it.

– That reminds me. Wasn't Natsume friendly with Tanuma in this class?

Then, my head was filled with Tanuma.

Tanuma came to this school later than Natsume as a student who transferred, and though we were in the same class, we hadn't spoken much. If I had to say, he had a quiet personality. Sometimes, I saw him looking vaguely out the corridor window at the school garden with nobody in it. He felt sort of mysterious, but Tanuma's home was the temple at Yatsuhara.

After seriously brooding over it, I spoke to Tanuma as he was heading home after school.

'Hey, Tanuma, you live at a temple, right?'

'Hm? Yeah.'

'Does your dad, y'know, do exorcisms and stuff?'

'No, I'm not sure... But why?'

'Ah, no... Sorry for asking you something weird.'

I messed up. No classmate would suddenly ask about exorcisms. He probably thought I was strange for saying something like that. Just as I was thinking that, Tanuma gave an unexpected response.

'I don't know too much about it either, but I know there are people who have that sort of job. It's not strange. Something's on your mind, right?'

'Eh? Yeah...'

'Try telling me about it. I don't think I'll be any help, but just talking about something to someone makes things easier.'

– Ah, what a good guy.

I decided to tell Tanuma about Aki-nee.

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'Hey, Tanuma, you live at a temple, right?'

'Hm? Yeah.'

'Does your dad, y'know, do exorcisms and stuff?'

After class had ended, I left the classroom to head home, when somebody unexpected called out to ask me that.

Furuya Kouta. He was extraordinarily sociable even in class, a popular guy who loved festivals and would volunteer to be the manager whenever there were school events. Though I wasn't on particularly close terms with him, even I had noticed that Furuya had been looking gloomy these past few days. I had heard a rumour that it was because his sister, who attended university, had been hospitalised, but the truth was nobody knew.

When I enquired as to why he was asking me that, Furuya was the one who looked like he had something difficult to say. I couldn't stand to watch any longer and said this to Furuya without thinking.

'Try telling me about it. I don't think I'll be any help, but just talking about something to someone makes things easier.'

– Um, what was I trying to do by saying that?

Then, Furuya told me about the strange incidents with his sister.

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Furuya's older sister, Akiko, who was working hard to get her teacher's licence at university, had suddenly fainted from anaemia at the elementary school where she was training. When she was examined at the hospital, since it was a slightly serious disease, she had to be hospitalised for treatment. However, it wasn't life-threatening, and if she stayed in hospital for two or three weeks and continued being treated as an outpatient, she would definitely get better, though it would take time, or so said the doctor. However, the stay in hospital went longer than expected, because Akiko had complained about feeling unwell. Her chest hurt, her side hurt, she had a headache. It changed every day, but her body started hurting here and there. However, when she was examined, nothing was out of the ordinary.

'At that time, I thought that Aki-nee... since she had been in hospital for so long, that she might have been lying about her symptoms.'

It seemed like that was how Furuya felt at first, but Akiko's condition looked like it was getting worse day after day. That showed up in the examination as well, and finally, Akiko had to take extended leave from university since long-term hospitalisation had become inevitable.

It was after that. Akiko's behaviour started becoming strange. In the morning, she would ask things

like whether Furuya remembered the promise at the hill behind the house or what he would do if she became a bride, but she would forget by evening and would always look vacantly out the window, blurting strange things from her mouth as if talking to somebody even though nobody was there.

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On the way home, while pushing his bicycle, Furuya explained the situation to me bit by bit. Furuya had suspected that the abnormal way his sister was acting was because of some evil spirit, but thought he was stupid for thinking that and had been worrying about it by himself without saying anything to anyone.

'So that's why you've seemed down lately.'

'Eh? You knew?'

'Yeah, the whole class knew.'

After I said that, Furuya looked extremely surprised. It seemed he had been doing his best to act cheerful so nobody would know he was depressed. When I thought about that, Furuya kind of seemed like a cute guy somehow and I smiled, chuckling a bit.

– But what could it be?

If Furuya's sister's behaviour was because of a youkai...

It was probably something I couldn't solve on my own. That said, I couldn't drag Natsume into trouble. While I thought about that, Furuya suddenly pointed at something faraway.

'Ah, look, just ahead. The hospital Aki-nee is in,' he said.

When I looked, in the landscape filled with rice paddies, there were two things that were odd – the bulging hill that looked like an ancient tomb and the pure white hospital that stood out from its surroundings like a castle.

'Ah, that... hm?'

When I looked carefully, I could faintly see a mysteriously coloured bridge between those two landmarks.

'What is it, Tanuma?'

'Ah, look, there's a rainbow there.'

'Rainbow? Where?'

'Between that hill and the hospital. The beautiful rainbow that looks just like a bridge.'

After saying that, I realised that Furuya might not have been able to see it.

'What are you saying? I can't see any rainbow. In the first place, it didn't even rain today.'

'A-ah, sorry, my mistake.'

That was dangerous. I had to try my best to keep people from knowing that I could sense the presence of youkai. However, if that rainbow-like bridge was somehow related to Furuya's sister's abnormal behaviour, it would become troublesome.

'Ah, but that hill might be related somehow.'

Furuya suddenly said something unexpected.

'Tanuma, you're friends with Natsume in class 2, right?'

'Eh? Natsume? Natsume's my friend, but what about him?' I replied, surprised.

'Well, I met him there this morning.'

'Eeh!? You met Natsume there?'

'Well, that doesn't really matter, but when I was a kid, I was told I couldn't go there?'

'Couldn't go there?'

'Putting it simply, there's a curse.'

'A curse?'

'If you go there, you'll be cursed – I thought it was just a threat to keep kids from going somewhere dangerous, but...'

'Do you have some sort of clue?'

'...No, it's nothing.'

Furuya cut himself off there. It was difficult for me to pry too, so we split up there and I went home. When we left, out of consideration for Natsume, he said, 'I don't think there's really any curse, but get that Natsume guy to be careful too, just in case. Tell him he shouldn't go there anymore.' Furuya seemed like a really good guy.

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'Natsume, why the long face? Did you eat something bad?'

'Nyanko-sensei, can't you be quiet? I'm thinking.'

'Just stop. You're probably worrying about something trivial again.'

It might've been trivial, but even knowing that, there were some things I couldn't ignore.

'Anyway, Natsume, I'll be getting that loan right back from you.'

'What loan?'

'You forgot, Natsume!? I accompanied you with the rude creature that woke me up early in the morning all the way to that incredibly faraway hill so you could give back a name.'

'It couldn't be helped since its friend had a foot stuck under a rock and couldn't move. Plus, it's natural for you to accompany me since you're my bodyguard, sensei.'

'Forget about that – it's what happened after. Who was the one who let you ride on his back when you were about to cry because you were going to be late for school?'

'Didn't you just tell me to hurry up and carry me on your own?'

'And because of that, you weren't late, right? I'll forgive you for ten manjuu from Nanatsujiya.'

'Ten!? You eat too much, sensei. How about five?'

'Hm. Eight!'

'Six.'

'Fine. I'll strike the bargain at seven.'

Even seven was a hard blow, but there was nothing to be done.

'More importantly, sensei, about the rumour we heard on the hill.'

'Hm?'

'A powerful youkai that lives on that mountain is going to have a wedding soon.'

'Ah, they did say that.'

'Omiyura-sama, I think. He used to be really respected and reigned over as far as the eye could see, but now he's just a youkai that used to be a god, living quietly on that hill.'

'Ah, now that level of ayakashi can be found anywhere.'

'The part I'm interested in is that his partner is a human. What's the meaning of that?'

'Just means he caught a human from somewhere around there to be his bride.'

'Eh, wouldn't that be abduction?'

'No, the spiritual energy over there is fairly strong. He won't do something so unreasonable. He'll exchange vows properly and take her in.'

'Exchange vows?'

'To put it simply, a promise.'

'But I'm saying, who's going to make that promise?'

'Ah, you're so troublesome. How would I know that? Whoever's making the promise – it's their problem, and it's none of your business at all. Don't stick your neck into something strange and make a fuss again, Natsume.'

'OK, I know.'

There were people who were important to me now. I couldn't act carelessly and cause them trouble. I knew that, but...

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The day after that, Tanuma called out to me after class.

'Natsume, could you come with me on the way back?'

'That's fine, but what is it?'

'There's something I want to show you.'

'Hm?'

After leaving school, Tanuma walked in a different direction than the one we always took heading home.

'What do you want to show me?'

'Hm, ah... Oh, Natsume, you met with Furuya from my class yesterday morning, right?'

'Furuya?'

'Near that hill way up ahead that looks like a tomb.'

'Eh? ... Ah!'

He was talking about that time. I had returned the name of the youkai whose foot had gotten stuck under a rock, and it had happily smashed the rock and disappeared in a gust of wind. Nyanko-sensei and I were blown away by that gust and flew into the road, where I happened to meet a student from the same school.

'D-did he say something?'

'No. He was worried about you.'

'Worried?'

'There seems to be a curse on that hill, so he said it'd be bad if something happened to you.'

'If that's all, it's fine. I didn't do anything that would cause me to be cursed.'

'Oh, I'm relieved.'

'That Furuya's a good guy too.'

'Yeah. I hadn't spoken with him much before, but he's a good guy.'

Tanuma told me the details of the worries Furuya had shared with him. His sister, who had been hospitalised, was acting strange. Furuya suspected that a spirit might have been the cause. While listening to Tanuma's story, something rang a bell, and I felt my heart tremble.

'Maybe Furuya's sister... She might've made a promise with the youkai who guards that hill.'

After I said that, Tanuma pointed at something far ahead.

'Look, over there.'

In the landscape filled with rice paddies, there were two landmarks. The hill where I went to return a name yesterday and the hospital beyond it. I was dumbfounded by what I saw between them.

'That's...'

'As I thought, you can see it, right?'

'Yeah.'

'All I can see is a faint line of light like a rainbow.'

'I see...'

'Tell me – what do you see, Natsume?'

'A bridge. I see a splendid bridge that's brilliantly ornamented.'

'A bridge?'

'A large number of ayakashi have gathered there and are dancing merrily.'

'Wha –'

'That's definitely... a bridge to welcome the bride.'

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The day after I consulted Tanuma, I felt like my heart had lifted slightly, and I went to visit my sister with a better mood than usual. I left school early to go to the hospital, and as expected, Aki-nee was vacantly looking out the window.

'Hey, Aki-nee. Do you see something out that window?'

'Eh? Nothing at all. I just see the same scenery as usual.'

The Aki-nee right now was my older sister, no different than before.

'But you've been looking out there all the time recently.'

'Really? It's just that there's nothing else to do.'

'How about studying for university? You were working hard at first for your return to school.'

'That's true. But I wonder what's up with me.'

'What do you mean, what's up with you?'

'I might not get better.'

'Of course you will!'

I yelled that in obvious anger.

'Oh dear, how frightening. You've been strange recently, Kouta.'

'The one who's been strange is Aki-nee – '

I started saying that, but I stopped.

'Forget it.'

I stuffed my cheeks with the peeled persimmons and sat up properly on the folding chair.

'Education training was fun, right?'

I said that while thinking of how Aki-nee would talk so happily about what she had done at school every day when I returned back when she was training at the elementary school.

'You said the children were cute, right?'

'Don't say that – it makes things harder...'

I cut myself off there.

'That's right – I remember the promise now.'

'The promise?'

'The promise at the hill in the back you talked about before.'

'I said something like that?'

'You did. That helped me remember.'

'What did you remember?'

'Back when I had just started elementary school, I went to that hill.'

'Eh, isn't that bad? People say there's a curse on that hill.'

'You don't remember? You were the one who saved me, Aki-nee, you know?'

'Really now.'

'I was playing hide-and-seek with friends near there. Since I was hiding from the kid who was it, I went on to a road that was off-limits and roped off with shimenawa. It was the domain of a god named Omiyura-sama, so it really was somewhere I wasn't supposed to go.'

'Omiyura-sama...'

'Naturally, my friend couldn't find me, and even after the sun had set, I wandered about the sacred ground. Then, once I went deeper into the forest, I found a small pond and a shrine. While I was staring at that shrine, something like a shadow emerged and slowly began looking more and more like a person. I was so scared as I watched that I screamed and fainted.'

'I heard that scream.'

Suddenly, Aki-nee's voice changed. My sister spoke like she had been possessed.

'While looking for you, since you still hadn't come back, I was passing by the hill when I heard a scream and went to search deliriously. You had fainted in front of the shrine by the pond. When I tried to rush over, I heard a voice. Small creatures, why have you violated taboo? That's what he said.'

'Taboo?'

'I apologised to the owner of that voice. I thought my brother would be killed, so I begged him frantically to save him. That I would do anything.'

'Nee-chan...'

'Then, the owner of that voice said this... Become my wife.'

'!'

Then, Aki-nee fainted, falling back down to her bed.

'Aki-nee! Aki-nee!'

'Eh? Kouta? What's wrong?'

My usual sister had returned.

I gathered my resolve and stood up.

'Aki-nee, wait. I'll do something about this.'

After saying that, I ran out of the hospital, went back home by bicycle and entered Aki-nee's room, which was the same as it was the day she was hospitalised.

As expected of a female university student, the room was neat but still cutely arranged. On the desk lined with university textbooks, there was a pencil case decorated with stickers and a plush animal that looked lonely since it had lost its owner. After looking around at everything, I took hold of a piece of paper that had been kept in a notebook stood up as a bookend and left home again.

I pedalled away on my bicycle and headed for that hill.

The sun was already setting. Once I found the road with the shimenawa that I had entered just once before as a child, I stepped in after clapping my hands together twice.

Brought out by the road I was taking, my childhood memories resurfaced. That's right – it was just ahead. After passing this thicket, on the other side – there it was. The small pond and shrine.

'Omiyura-sama! I came with a request!'

I shouted that out loudly.

'Please give back Aki-nee!'

Just as if Omiyura-sama's household was being threatened by an intruder, the surrounding trees started rustling noisily. I felt a chill run down my spine, and my heart was thumping furiously.

'I'm begging you – please don't take my sister away!'

Right as I yelled that, I felt as if some strong power was released from behind the gates of the shrine, where I could see nothing.

'Urgh.'

That moment, I sensed strong anger towards the person who had violated taboo and trespassed on sacred ground. Ah, I'm probably going to die. That's what I thought, but I wanted to at least save my sister. I was praying for that. I fainted, as if I had been hit by lightning. I just held the piece of paper in my hand tightly.

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When I came to, I was in a hospital bed.

'Furuya, are you awake?'

Next to me, to my surprise, was Tanuma.

'Doctor, Furuya's opened his eyes.'

Tanuma went out to the corridor and called a doctor and nurse. They checked my pulse and looked at my pupils. Once things had calmed down, Tanuma spoke up.

'I was concerned about what you said yesterday, so I went to the hill. Then, you suddenly came out onto the street and fainted.'

'Eh? The street?'

'Yeah. You tottered over from the direction of the hill. I was really surprised.'

'Did you carry me here, Tanuma?'

'After calling the hospital, some people came right away. They knew who you were once I said Furuya. You're a bit famous.'

The way he said it jokingly might have been that guy's kindness.

'This is the hospital room next to your sister's.'

'My sister? How is she?'

'Seems like she's sleeping. You should sleep some too.'

'Ah, that's right. Where's the paper?'

'You mean this?'

Tanuma handed over the paper I had taken from my sister's room. It seemed that I wouldn't let go of it at all until I had reached here.

'Well, I'll be going back now.'

'Tanuma, thanks.'

Tanuma gave me a smile as he left.

I grasped the paper that I had meant to show Omiyura-san tightly and fell asleep again.

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'I wonder if Furuya's OK.'

'Don't worry – that guy'll do fine.'

'That's right – if Tanuma's with him, there's nothing to worry about.'

After seeing the bridge between the hill and the hospital, we were confident that Furuya's sister was to be taken by the spirit of the hill to be his bride. We decided to go to the hill and talk to Omiyura-sama directly. Nyanko-sensei came as my bodyguard. When we reached the foot of the hill, we heard a scream. We rushed over and found that Furuya had fainted near the shrine by the pond. Tanuma and I carried him off of the hill. While Tanuma took him to the hospital, Nyanko-sensei and I went to the hill again.

The thicket opened up to reveal the shrine by the pond.

'Omiyura-sama, please show yourself!'

The surrounding trees rustled.

'What, what? Another human child?'

'They've been very fussy today.'

The spirits of the household appeared all at once, looking like ogres and tengu.

'Human child, what do you want?'

From the back of the shrine, I watched something with a human figure slowly come into sight. Accompanied by an elderly attendant, an aristocrat garbed in an ancient manner stood there. The one who spoke was the elderly attendant.

'You're Omiyura-sama...! I have a request. Please don't take Furuya's older sister.'

'That again? Omiyura-sama is very angry. Do you want to end up like that brat from earlier?'

'Please wait. Furuya's sister had been a child when she made the promise, right? It's a promise from when she still didn't know anything.'

'Be quiet, brat. That's why Omiyura-sama waited until now. Then, taking this ayakashi's dream road, passing through her dream, he confirmed their mutual feelings again.'

'What did you say?'

'Now, she has also consented to become Omiyura-sama's wife. No, rather, the two of them love each other.'

'That's...'

Then, the aristocrat who had said nothing up until now spoke to Natsume with a voice like a bell.

'Human child who can see us, out of consideration for that power and your feelings for your friend, I will forgive his transgression. However, give up on she who is to become my bride. I also love her now.'

'Omiyura-sama, it will soon be the time for tonight's crossing.'

'This will also be the end of the transient trysts in our dreams. I shall welcome my bride tonight.'

The spirits of his household started heading towards the bridge that led to the hospital.

'Ah, wait!'

Nyanko-sensei and I chased them and tried to cross the bridge, but at the moment we stepped on it, the bridge immediately became transparent and our bodies went right through.

'Uwah!'

Nyanko-sensei and I slid down the slope like that. All we could do was watch as Omiyura-sama calmly crossed the bridge.

'What was up with that bridge? Why can't we cross?'

'Sir... sir Natsume.'

When I looked towards the direction of the voice, I saw the ayakashi whom I returned the name to yesterday and its friend.

'Sir, that bridge is the ayakashi's dream road, and it allows us to enter people's dreams. If you haven't drunk matcha from the container that Omiyura-sama has cast his magic on, you won't be able to cross.'

'Omiyura-sama plans on using that bridge tonight to take his bride.'

'He's going to take her in her dream? What does that mean?'

'The actual person will probably die.'

Nyanko-sensei answered for the ayakashi.

'That – we have to stop him! Isn't there any way?'

'Hehehe, truth is, Omiyura-sama's matcha is right here. It's too good for us, so we brought it here in this gourd without even drinking a sip.'

'As thanks for returning my name, we'll give this to you, sir Natsume.'

'Really? Thank you.'

I took the gourd, drank a sip and handed it to Nyanko-sensei.

'Uwah, it's so bitter. *cough, cough*'

Sensei drank it unhappily too, and we climbed the slope to reach the edge of the bridge.

We took one step. This time, we didn't slip through. We ran forwards to chase after Omiyura-sama.

On top of the sky – when I suddenly looked to the sides of the bridge, the pond filled with water had changed, and I could see the lights of the town full of people at the bottom of the pond. The hospital had become at some point an old aristocratic mansion, and the landscape had changed along with it. I seemed that I had already entered the dream. I saw the spirits of Omiyura-sama's household bringing along a beautiful woman. She was the bride. Sensei and I followed. When we were persuading Omiyura-sama, Furuya appeared in the dream world.

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After Tanuma went home, it seemed that I saw that dream again.

– Aki-nee... Aki-nee?

I was wandering around the forest as I searched for Aki-nee. The trees were withered, and their branches were cold and sharp like icicles. This was... the forest on the hill.

After the thicket opened up, I saw the garden with the pond and a splendid mansion of two buildings bound by a bridge. This was the old pond and shrine on the hill, and the other building was probably the hospital. Aki-nee stood on top of the bridge that bound the two buildings.

– Aki-nee!

When I tried to rush towards her, he came out again on the bridge. I was frozen in fear again. I could hear their two voices from afar.

'I've been waiting.'

'Now, tonight of all nights I expect a favourable response.'

'...'

'Now.'

Just as Aki-nee looked like she would say yes –

'Wait!'

Somebody ran out from the building in the back.

– Natsume!?

'Please, won't you think about this once more?'

'Eh, what a troublesome brat.'

An elderly attendant of the aristocrat appeared from somewhere and stood in front of Natsume.

'Don't get in our way.'

'If Omiyura-sama just takes a bride, we will once again be able to take back our power.'

The household, in the shape of ogres and tengu, surrounded Natsume.

– Natsume, run!

I yelled that furiously in my heart, but that voice didn't reach him.

'Hey! You small fry are noisy!'

Suddenly, the white pig-like thing that had been at Natsume's side transformed into a gigantic beast and roared. I remembered that this was a dream. Since it was a dream, anything could happen.

'Omiyura or whatever, you should know that you won't be able to get back your past glory by doing something like this.'

The aristocrat by my sister's side stared at the beast.

'They are saying that on their own. I simply love her.'

'... But... if you take her with you, since she's a human, she'll lose her life. Just as you think fondly of her, there are also people who don't want to lose her.'

Natsume said that quietly, like he was forcing the words out.

'Human child. I cannot surmise the way life should be through only the sense of value that humans put to it. The way she lives is something she should herself choose. Now, she was about to choose to go together with me.'

'That's... Is that really OK, Furuya's sister!?'

I was given a start by Natsume's outcry.

Is it really OK like this, Furuya Kouta? I heard Natsume's words as if he were speaking to me. Is it OK to just stand here and watch silently while Aki-nee is being taken away, Kouta!?

– Hey, it's just a dream anyway, so anything can happen!

'Aki-nee! Don't go!'

I yelled aloud.

'It's a human – another human's slipped through!'

Everyone around was in an uproar.

'Aki-nee, look at – look at this!'

I showed her the paper that I had been grasping in my hand.

'That's...'

'It's a collection of notes from the students at the school you were training at – they wrote it for

you.'

One by one, I started reading the clumsy letters written by childish hands.

'Furuya-sensei, get better soon and come back, OK? It's lonely without you here. I remember the word 'like' that you taught me. Akiko-sensei, I really like you.'

Aki-nee's expression changed.

'A-ah... I... I...'

Aki-nee looked at Omiyura-sensei with a miserable expression, and said this.

'Sorry, I can't go.'

Omiyura-sama said nothing. Probably, he smiled once sadly, turned his back towards us and departed.

I didn't really remember much of what happened after that. The spirits of the household who had made such a fuss and the gigantic beast Natsume's pet had transformed into were wreaking havoc, and I took Aki-nee's hand and fled from that nonsensical development, while Natsume... at some point, Natsume and that beast disappeared somewhere. That was what I remembered from the dream.

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When I opened my eyes, for some reason, I wasn't worried at all about Aki-nee and was thinking this.

– I have to thank Natsume.

But what should I say? Thanks for what you did in the dream? No way.

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A few days after that, Aki-nee's inexplicable symptoms completely disappeared. Her condition got better too, and it was finally decided that she would be let out of hospital. She couldn't return to school yet, but the doctor said that she would definitely get better recovering at home. After she got better, I thought we could go together once to Omiyura-sama. Without going on the hill, I would leave flowers or something as an offering... since he had thought so fondly of Aki-nee, waited for so many years, and given her up for her sake.

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When I was looking for Tanuma after class so that I could tell him about Aki-nee's being let out of hospital, I found Tanuma and Natsume together. I called out to Tanuma and told him that my sister had been let out of hospital and that she was working hard to become a teacher. Tanuma looked honestly happy for her.

'Well, I'm heading this way.'

'Bye then.'

'... Ah, wait.'

After we parted, I called out to the two of them and finally said this.

'Thanks for what you did that time.'

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Notes:

Kouta refers to himself as ore (俺), an informal pronoun often used by men, and calls his sister Aki-nee (姉) in his dream, a shorter and more informal version of onee-san (お姉さん) meaning older sister. He also refers to her as nee-chan (姉ちゃん) later when talking to his mother. I kept it as nee-chan since changing it to sister/big sister/&c. felt a bit awkward in translation (though I know this isn't much better.)

Incidentally, when the siblings say each other's names, they're written in katakana – Aki (アキ) and Kouta/Kou-chan (コウタ/コウちゃん), while when Kouta's mother says their names, they're written in kanji – Akiko (アキコ) and Kouta (コウタ).

Shinden-zukuri describes a style of Heian palatial architecture. [Wikipedia](#) has a fine image of a model that includes a pond.

The ancient tomb is specifically a kofun (古墳) and is in the shape of a mound. These would be rather large, as you can see in [this picture](#).

Shimenawa (しめなわ, though also 注連縄 and 注連縄) is the traditional straw rope used for purification in Shinto. You can see an example [here](#) with shide (しで), the paper streamers seen on the wands miko use.

When Kouta claps his hands together, it's kashiwade (かしわで) – clapping hands together in prayer, done in order to call a god to make your request and to exorcise spirits (in which case the second clap has to sound).